

**SATOSHI
WAGAHARA**
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**THE
DEITY
IS
A
PART-
TIMER**



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THE DEVIL IS A PART- TIMER!

14

**SATOSHI
WAGAHARA**
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(ABOUT TO BE) A PART-TIMER!



MAYUMI KISAKI

"Well, you certainly have a lot of responsibility as a regional manager, don't you? Unlike you, all the people

"Good to see you," the woman said as she waved, apparently remembering Chiho, before her eyes settled upon Sarii. "You *do* seem to enjoy your MgRonald, don't you, Sarue?"

Sariel cried the tears of a helplessly smitten man as he was dragged out the door, while Chiho could do nothing but watch the two of them go.

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!

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THE DEVIL IS A PART-TIMER!, Volume 14

SATOSHI WAGAHARA, ILLUSTRATION BY 029 (ONIKU) Translation by Kevin Gifford

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**THE
HERO
AND
HIGH
SCHOOLER
BECOME
FRIENDS**



THE HERO AND HIGH SCHOOLER BECOME FRIENDS

Chiho Sasaki's shift at the mostly empty McGonald restaurant in front of Hatagaya station was almost entirely spent with a frown on her face. Her manager, Mayumi Kasaki, didn't lecture her about it because she was frowning even harder. The floor was practically dead—and since Kasaki wasn't aware of what had happened just a few minutes' walk away from the place, she had no idea why.

"Hey, uh, Chi?"

The sound of her shift mate Sadao Maou's voice behind her made Chiho shiver a little, panicking for a moment that he had read her mind. Gingerly, she turned her face toward his, only to find Maou looking even more reluctant than she, apparently unaware of anything.

"You know, with my power, I could erase all the bad memories...you..."

Just that was enough to make the blood rush into Chiho's head. She could feel her head and ears rise in temperature as the emotions flooded in. It must've been written all over her face, because it made Maou's voice taper off midway.

"...uh, have..."

Chiho couldn't keep her lips from trembling. With the rather unique day she had just experienced, her mind was still too jumbled up to do anything else.

Maou, what do you mean when you say "bad memories"? Do you have the wrong idea about me and you, or me and that other girl? Or is this about how you and Ashiya are actually these crazy monsters...?

"No thanks."

"Huh?"

The denial just fell right out of her mouth.

Realistically speaking, there were a million “bad memories” she could’ve had. She had gone through a really scary, fairly painful experience—a massive succession of unthinkable events. She had so many things she wanted to ask and learn about. But despite that:

“You’re so *stupid*, Maou!”

She instead opted for the kind of scolding she had delivered maybe just a couple of times in her life.

“Huhhhhh?”

Maou seemed genuinely hurt by that. It only added to Chiho’s rapidly accelerating frustration with him.

Somewhere, in the part of her logical mind she could still keep intact, she could tell Maou was just looking out for her, aware of the mental and emotional shock caused by the events he had gotten her involved in. He had exposed her to all this stuff about magic, and killing, and demons, and so on, and he was trying to rid her of all those painful memories. But there was really only one open question lurking in her heart, and Maou demonstrated no recognition of that at all.

They exchanged no further words until the end of the shift, and even then it was only a robotic “Thanks. See you next shift.” She didn’t wait for Maou to respond before walking out the door, him looking totally bewildered the whole time. She thought about that as she walked alone under the streetlights lining the Kosu-Kaido road.

“He’s such a...dummy...”

He had no idea why she was angry.

“Even... Even though I just wanted to say it myself...”

She took long, wide steps down the sidewalk, her face reddened by her anger—along with certain other emotions. Maybe it was misguided to blame Maou alone for all of this. He had never brought the topic up himself—it was those other two people, the non-demons, from the other world who first mentioned it. But, at this point, she hoped he would at least offer some kind of reaction.

“I narrowed down the people receivin’ it to ‘human beings who think about nothing but the Devil King all day.’”

“Oh, myyyy! Quite the player, aren’t you, Devil King?”

The words echoed back into Chiho’s mind. And out of all the events that had completely changed her view on life since the start of this week, there was just one fact she actually wouldn’t mind erasing from reality.

“I just...wish I could’ve said to his face that no matter what happens, I love him...”



She had thought that a world full of people flying through the air and tossing swords and magic blasts around was strictly in the realm of fairy tales. But in the space of a few seconds, the humdrum life of Chiho Sasaki—going to school, working part-time, developing a little bit of a crush on her coworker—had been stomped flat.

The object of her affections, a guy living in an ancient, cramped, wooden apartment building in the Sasazuka neighborhood with his friend, was a demon from another world. They both were, actually. And the call-center lady she was acquainted with was a “Hero” from that world, capable of conjuring up a sword out of nothing. And it’d be one thing if they fought each other to the death, but instead they worked together to fight off this *other* scary guy, and now it was all over and they were back at McRonald and the call center like nothing was amiss. They were interacting with her exactly like they always did.

She didn’t feel bad about it. Yes, she had been a little scared while the fight was unfolding. All the facts she had learned afterward had excited her. But right now, she...didn’t really know what to feel. Somehow, everyone around her was acting like none of it had ever happened, but they indeed knew the truth, and she couldn’t just make that go away. She didn’t know how to approach those men. The amiable relationship they had before didn’t seem right any longer. And it made the distance between them grow wider.

They were edging away from her, and that felt the worst of all.



“...I can’t do this.”

She couldn’t count how many times she had turned back today, right in front of this place. She was about to spin around on her heels and try to go back the way she had come—away from Villa Rosa Sasazuka, the wooden apartment building that was a five-minute walk away from Keio Sasazuka Station. She managed to make it one step before stopping and heaving a deep sigh. No matter what she did, she couldn’t drum up the courage to climb those stairs.

“Maou has the day off anyway. I’d just stress him out if I dropped in.”

Since the day of that battle, the number of times she and Maou had looked each other in the eyes had plummeted. They didn’t share a shift most days this week, it was true, but that was only half of it. The other half lay in how she was actively avoiding him.

The shift schedule she had submitted for the second half of the month gave her an entire week off from work. She explained it as needing time to prepare for midterms and wrangle the new recruits in her club sports, but really, she wasn’t hurting for time. The remaining shifts were all things like Saturdays, which Maou rarely signed on for, and seven to ten PM on days when Maou opened and stayed at work till eight in the evening. She was actively searching for ways to avoid making eye contact with him.

Kisaki had accepted the “busy at school” excuse, but Chiho knew she had a sharp mind. It was already apparent she’d noticed that Chiho was trying to evade Maou. “I don’t know if something’s up,” the manager had once said right to her face, “but if you’re having trouble handling stuff, don’t be afraid to talk to me about it.” And, yes, she was having trouble—but unlike before, this wasn’t the kind of concern she could solve by talking to someone.

“Uuugh...”

With a groan, Chiho started walking back toward the apartment—but once she spotted its roof, off in the distance, her pace visibly slowed. “What am I doing?” she asked herself. She had intended to apologize for acting so immature around him and then talk to him about her true feelings.

“I...I really like him...”

But once she saw the apartment's stairwell in front of her, Chiho realized something: Who was "Sadao Maou," really? If everything she'd seen actually happened, the real Sadao Maou was that gigantic, monstrous, nonhuman figure that had loomed above her. So was that helpful, reliable coworker at MgRonald she loved just a big front? If the *real* Maou was the demon who kept the Shuto Expressway from collapsing on her, then how should she deal with the "Sadao Maou" inside this apartment?

The thought made Chiho step away from the building, another lap on the little back-and-forth circuit she was now well familiar with.

After that battle under the expressway, her heart had frozen to the point that she was willing to accept pretty much anything. Still, the more time passed, the less she understood how she should act around Maou. She wanted to believe the one she loved; she wanted to tell him herself that she loved him. What if the person she fell in love with turned out to be nothing like she thought?

Is the man living in that apartment truly the man I love?

Chiho sprinted through the city, approaching the spot by Sasazuka Station that no longer showed any sign of the explosive battle that took place just a few days ago, and—

"Ah, s-sorry..."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

—bumped into someone again. That was what had happened last time, too, wasn't it? She had gotten into a huge tizzy over something, ran away at top speed, and ran *into* that terrible person who thrust her into that battle. That memory flashed across her mind for a moment, but it was a woman she had run into this time—a woman she had only recently met...

"Ah."

"Oh, it's you..."

The other recognized Chiho at once. Chiho wasn't sure how to address her, this woman with beautiful long hair and a strong, willful pair of eyes.

"Ms....Yusa?"

“It’s been a while, Chiho...or maybe not, huh?”

Emi Yusa, the “Hero” who came to this world from somewhere else. Just like Maou. Her, and:

“And Albert, and Emeralda...”

Albert was standing behind Emi Yusa, looking like a star athlete visiting Japan from overseas. Emeralda was the tiny woman next to him, even smaller than Chiho. They accompanied Emi on her “quest,” apparently, and while Albert looked just like he did when she had first met him, Emeralda—who had looked like a sorceress straight out of a fantasy world at first—no longer seemed out of place in Japan with her modern clothing. Presumably, they had tried and failed to find something that fit Albert, what with that Olympic hammer-thrower physique he had.

“Are you going to Maou’s place?” Chiho found herself asking. Emi and her two friends were on a quest to defeat Maou back in their old world—they weren’t preparing to settle the score right now, were they? Despite having just run away from his building, too confused to know how to deal with him, she was still wary of anyone who might do harm to him.

But the three of them simply exchanged confused stares with each other.

“You remember us, young lady?”

“Huh?”

The hulking Albert’s question both surprised and slightly irritated Chiho. She couldn’t have forgotten them all if she tried. The offhand remark seriously disquieted her.

“Thiiis is kind of a shooock,” the similarly surprised-looking Emeralda drawled.

It had been just a week since the battle that blew up Sasazuka Station and brought down the Shuto Expressway. That, if anything, could never be forgotten. But despite the reactions of her companions, Emi gave them a nod of conviction.

“Didn’t I tell you? Of course she’d remember us.”

“Um, what’re you talking about, Ms. Yusa?”

It was Emi herself who had told Chiho all about Ente Isla and the demons, wasn't it? As if to answer the question, Emi looked Chiho in the eye.

"I'm sorry we're sounding all weird. But you're right. We came to check out how Maou is doing...or, really, I hope you don't mind if I keep calling him 'Devil King.' But then we were planning to visit the McGonald at Hatagaya, so we could...you know, see how you were doing, Chiho."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Albert said. "Just to see if...um, you remember us, an' that day, and to make sure the Devil King hasn't been doin' anything weird to you."

"I thought he would have made you forget about iit."

Something stirred in Chiho's heart. "You mean," she quietly asked, "like, how nobody else in town seems to remember it happened?"

"...You noticed?" Emi humbly replied.

"I mean, it'd be a little hard not to! Nobody else is talking about it apart from Maou, and there's been nothing on TV, or in the news, or on the Internet. It just made me kind of think that you or he did some kind of...magic thing, or something. Plus..."

"Ch-Chiho?"

"Um, miss?"

"Ummm..."

The three of them were all flustered in their own way.

"M-Maou asked if I, I wanted my m-memory erased, and, and, I mean, it's not *bad* or, or anything..."

Chiho's lips quivered. Her temples felt like they were going to spontaneously combust. She couldn't keep her eyes from tearing up. It made Emi want to roll her eyes.

"That stupid..."

"I—I don't know anything about, um, demons, or other worlds, or, or whatever, but...! But, I—I still feel like Maou's... Oh, but what should I even

do...?! I don't even... Agh!"

She let the tears flow freely, stammering enough that passersby started to notice. It took a firm hug from Emi to make her stop.

"I'm sorry we put you through all this chaos."

"..."

"If you'd like to talk to us, we'll tell you about anything you might like to know, so... Sorry."

"M...Ms. Yusa...wehhhhh..."

She sobbed into Emi's chest, as if letting out all the confusion and unease she had kept locked up in her heart until today.

"Yeah," said Albert as he watched from behind, "um, what're we gonna do about this, eh? She's talkin' about the Devil King, right? So she's..."

"I don't thiiink," the half-squinting Emeralda coldly replied to him, "someone who'd say something as indelicate as *thaaat* right in front of the man himself would understand toooo much."

She was referring to the bombshell Albert had unleashed in the tiny, cramped Devil's Castle earlier. He and Emeralda had first traveled to Japan to search for the missing Emi, using a telepathic technique known as an Idea Link to make contact with people who thought about nothing but the Devil King all day. The signal wound up being received more keenly by the Maou-stricken Chiho than by Emi, something that Albert had inadvertently revealed right in front of Maou. Having a stranger disclose all her most personal feelings like that was, to Chiho, devastating.

"Hey, don't get all testy with me... You were into it as much as I was, weren'tcha?"

Albert, to his credit, appeared to be at least somewhat aware of his misdeeds, although he was less than happy about receiving all the blame.

"It's okay if I am. I'm a girrrl."

"So, so it's indelicate for me and not for you? And don'tcha think yer too old to go around callin' yourself a 'girl' by now?!"

The resulting toe kick from Emeralda penetrated through Albert's thick leather pants, landing squarely on his shin and making him groan in pain. She followed this up with a chop to his throat as he crumpled to the ground, then began to conjure up a glowing orb in her hand that she kept from public view. Her eyes, illuminated by this light—quite unlike her cheerful voice—weren't laughing at all.

“Ready to dieee?”

“W-wait! Wait, all right? I'm sorry!”

“What're you two doing...?”

Emi, still holding on to Chiho, had finally turned around to see this comedy sketch being played out behind her.

“We were going to eat lunch first anyway. Why don't we take Chiho somewhere quiet so we can chat?”

“...Chat about whaaat?” a quizzical Emeralda asked, noting the way Chiho was still openly weeping. Albert, meanwhile, was still weeping on the ground for his own reasons as he rubbed his shin.

“I mean, everything,” Emi gravely replied. “About us, the Devil King, and Ente Isla.”



“You're just, um, joking with me, right, Ms. Yusa? About being from another world and stuff?”

Emi raised an eyebrow. “What's with *that* all of a sudden?”

“I mean...”

Chiho kept following behind Emi, a mixture of expectation and anxiety in her mind. They would talk about that other world, about Emi, about Albert and Emeralda, about the two people who had kidnapped her, about Ashiya—and about Maou. All would be revealed, she knew, and so it was with a notably nervous expression that she was guided by Emi straight into...

“Why are we in a conveyor-belt sushi joint?”

The question came after they were all seated in a booth, Chiho still wiping her

eyes as the aroma of vinegared rice and seafood penetrated her nostrils.

“You don’t like sushi?”

“No, I do, but...”

It wasn’t a matter of food preference, no.

“Okay, two clam miso soups for number five!”

“Check for seventeen, please!”

“Thank you very muuuch! Uhh, that’s nineteen color plates, three gold plates...”

The restaurant was apparently doing well. Most of the seats were occupied, with parties circulating in and out of the tables on a regular basis. And with all the loud chatter among the staff, it wasn’t the kind of “quiet” place Chiho had been picturing for their conversation. The simple fact that a “Hero” from another world chose a sushi restaurant for their confidential chat left Chiho struggling to figure out how to respond.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s my treat today.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about! And I can totally cover for myself, thanks!”

“Huuuh?” For some reason, this took Emeraldalda by total surprise. “R-reeeally?”

“Really *what?*”

This threw Chiho. The woman wasn’t poking fun at her; she honestly seemed shocked by her offer to pay her own way.

“This ‘sushi’ is raw fish, riiight?”

“Y-yes...” Chiho blinked. Thinking of sushi as merely “raw fish” was new to her.

“Well, that’s *verrry* fancy cuisine, isn’t it? I can understand if you’re still waaary of us, but I think you should let Emiilia pay for you.”

“Um, it’s a hundred yen per plate...?”

Chiho instinctively turned her eyes toward the menus on the table. The Gyo-

Gyo-En chain was a midsize presence in the industry, with nearly everything on the menu priced at a hundred yen per dish (plus tax). This didn't apply to things like seasonal items, fancier fish, miso soup, à la carte requests, and so on, but even if Chiho tried to really pig out, she may or may not be looking at a thousand-yen tab at the end, at most.

"Calm down, Eme. All four of us can have our fill here and *maybe* we'd have to pay the equivalent of one Airenian silver coin."

"Whoa! For real?!"

Albert looked ready to jump for joy.

"Whaaa?! That's craazy! I've been able to enjoy raw fish maaaybe a couple of times in alllll my travels, and I live in a *palace*, I'll remind you!"

"All right, how about we all just sit down for now, okay? You too, Chiho. Here's some tea."

With a learned hand, Emi poured packets of powdered green tea into a series of three cups, filled them from a nearby hot-water dispenser, and passed them around.

"Fresh water and tea, at no charge," marveled Albert as he carefully brought the cup to his mouth. "Wonders never cease!"

Seeing this display only served to further confuse Chiho. She still had no idea why they had gone to a conveyor-belt sushi place to discuss fantastic tales of faraway worlds, and now she felt like she'd been immersed headfirst into a TV documentary about foreign visitors being wowed by Japanese culture.

"So, right, why I brought us here," Emi finally began once she had passed out tea, moist towelettes, chopsticks, and soy-sauce dishes to the whole crowd. "This is actually a pretty good place to talk in privacy. You have these big booths, pretty spread out from one another. It's loud inside, and the other customers are too busy scoping out what to try next to care about other people's conversations. At the same time, though, we've got a good view of the entire place, so if someone's trying to listen in on us, they'll be easy to spot."

"...Oh. That kind of thing?"

Chiho gave the restaurant a look around. She hadn't noticed it until now, but unless they were seated on barstools, there was simply no way to decipher all the chattering around them, no matter how much they strained their ears. Everyone's attention was focused either on the sushi trundling by or on their nearby ordering touchscreens. Nobody cared about much of anything a foot or two past their own seat. They were near a business district as well, which meant that a small handful of non-Japanese people were also among the customers, making Albert and Emeralda not stand out quite so much.

"Right. So how about we put something in our stomachs first? We can get serious about talking once the blood starts flowing into our heads more."

Chiho hadn't fully accepted this yet, but she was at least willing to play along. Emi, realizing this, clapped her hands and promptly took a plate off the belt. This was *sayori*, the Japanese halfbeak, a pretty hard-core sushi choice for one's first selection.

"So you take whatever you want to eat off of this conveyor belt, and then you stack up your empty plates to the side. Then they bill you based on the number and types of plates you took."

That, of course, was meant for Emeralda and Albert. The two Ente Islan women were both next to the conveyor belt as it passed by the booth, with Albert and Chiho facing each other on the aisle side.

Emeralda watched the sushi whiz by, a look of bemused astonishment on her face. "I'm not sure I'm too famillliar with this smell yet," she said, "buuut is this really fiiish?"

"Yep. They cut raw fish into those shapes and put it on top of rice prepared with vinegar and shaped into those little ovals like that."

"What's that thing that looks like a li'l cut-up black log?" Albert asked as a *kappamaki* cucumber sushi roll came down the pike.

"That's called *norimaki* sushi. The black part is called *nori*, and...um, it's kind of a processed seaweed, I guess you could say? It's all edible, though."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh! There's that thing of noriii, and, and, it's got *fish eggs* on top of iiit?!"

“Yeah, they call that *gunkan maki*, or ‘battleship roll.’ And you’re right—that’s *ikura* on top—salmon eggs. It’s really good.”

“‘Battleship’?”

“Yeah. It kind of looks like a boat from the side, doesn’t it? That’s why they call it that.”

“Oooh! That’s so cuuute! And if you think of it thaaat way, that green melon-like thing looks like a ship’s saaail!”

The sight of the slice of cucumber carefully balanced on top of the *ikura* made Emeralda’s eyes sparkle. How were they ever going to have a serious conversation in here? Chiho flashed an unamused look at the other three people in the booth, carrying on about their meal and all but leaving her in the dust. *Do Albert and Emeralda even know how to use chopsticks? And raw fish is one thing, but are they okay with wasabi?* Any Japanese people watching a foreigner eat sushi for the first time would think the same things.

“Well,” Albert said as he pointed at the conveyor, “let’s give it a go. Emilia, can you choose some fer me? ‘Cause none of this looks at all like fish to me. Like, if you told me that red guy over there was meat, I’d believe ya.”

“Oh, the *chutoro*? That’s medium-fatty tuna. Wanna try it?” Emilia answered as he pointed directly at a piece.

Most offerings at this place came as two pieces per plate, but the more expensive selections, such as *chutoro* and snow crab, gave you just one piece for the same hundred-yen price. And watching that pass by, the sweet-looking white bands of fat passing over the red flesh in beautiful fashion, it really *could* pass for the meat of some land animal.

Emi casually took it off the belt and placed it in front of Albert, Emeralda steadily watching every motion along the way.

“Mmmmh...”

The sight of this monolith of a man carefully eyeing the little piece of tuna presented before him was pretty humorous.

“Just looks like a hunk of raw meat, if y’ask me... You’re sure I should just eat

this as is?”

“It’s fine! And here, you take this soy sauce—it’s a Japanese specialty—and dip it in there before you eat it. It’s okay to just use your hands, too.”

“Okay...”

Guess he can’t use chopsticks after all, Chiho thought, not that it particularly mattered. Albert, meanwhile, gave the tuna a deadly serious look as he grabbed it with two fingers, his reluctance abundantly clear as he gave it just a light dab in the soy sauce. Chiho heard somewhere once that it was more proper to put the sauce on the fish, not the rice, but bringing that up would just confuse him even further.

Slowly, Albert brought the *chutoro* up to his lips, then—abandoning all reserve—tossed the whole thing into his mouth. Deliberately, he began to chew, eyebrows arching upward at the unfamiliar texture. The reaction from that point forward was dramatic. His eyes shot open, as if he’d just been exposed to some vital truth. Chiho spotted Emeralda visibly quiver as she leaned up and out of her seat. They were treating this single piece of sushi with *far* too much trepidation.

Albert sped up his chewing, his eyes staring into space. Then he winced, putting a hand over his nose.

“Ooh!!”

Chiho and Emi immediately knew what happened. Emeralda was somewhat less familiar with the inner workings of sushi. “Is...is there something wronnnng?” she worriedly asked. But the wincing was gone in another moment. He started chewing again, his face serene, and then swallowed.

“.....Hahhh.”

Albert brought a hand back to his tensed-up face, eyes still wide open. A couple nervous beads of sweat were even visible on his forehead.

“Are... Are you all riiight?”

Instead of answering, Albert looked straight at Chiho in front of him.

“...Little lady?” he intoned.

“Y-yes?”

“Is... Is this *really* fish?”

“Huh?”

The experience had made Albert shudder.

“It’s raw, but it doesn’t *taste* raw at all... It’s...sweet, even.”

“Sweet?!”

“Y-yeah, but not sweet like sugar, y’know? I dunno how to put this. The sweetness of *meat*, maybe? And it mixes together with that sauce and the grain to create this kinda...*texture*. Yeah. Texture. I think she said it’s called *umami*.”

It wasn’t exactly the kind of terminology sushi restaurants would use (and turned sort of rambling at the end), but Chiho could tell that Albert really enjoyed the *chutoro*.

“Wh-what does all of that meeean?”

“Well, no, um, *eat* it, Eme—you eat it, too, or else you’ll never get it. I mean, I can’t believe it—this is *fish*? This can’t be the same thing as all that smoky, salty stuff I’m used to eatin’...”

He lowered his head to the table, hands covering his face.

“Um, Albert?” Chiho asked, concerned about this reaction.

“This reminds me a lot of when I first tried sushi,” Emi commented, deeply moved.

“Oooh... But didn’t you say ‘oooh’ in the middle of it, tooo? There’s got to be something foooul to it...”

Being told “eat it” wasn’t quite enough to quell Emerald’s fears, on the other hand. The “oooh” bit was Albert pinching his nose, no doubt reacting to the sensation of fresh wasabi in his sinuses. It was something any Japanese person would be aware of, something Chiho was about to point out before she stopped herself.

What...*was* wasabi, anyway? How would she convey everything that wasabi meant—this knobby green plant, its roots grated to produce a lime-green paste

that brought heat, sweetness, and a unique clearing sensation to the nose—to someone who had no concept of what it was? Chiho's concern was that the more detail she dared to get into, the more it'd sound like she was rattling off the traits of some kind of poison.

Emi was stewing about it for a bit as well, playing with a used wasabi packet in her hand. Then, perhaps coming to the same conclusion as Chiho, she returned it to the pile of empties without further comment. And in the time Albert had spent on his little speech, the conveyor belt had done a complete cycle and that sushi with the *ikura* was on its way back.

"Well, how about that *ikura*? It's coming right up, and the stuff that made Al go 'ooh' isn't in it, so I think it'll be easier for you to eat. You've eaten fish eggs before, haven't you?"

"Y-yesss...but they were boiled down with fish sauce and saaalt..."

"Well, if you can't finish it, I'll take the rest."

"Ooooh..."

Emeralda looked about ready to die as she stared at the *gunkan maki* flowing on by.

"Just try it. Remember what Al said?"

"A-all riiight... Hyah!"

It took far too monumental an effort to pick up the dish. Even when placed in front of her, she was so hesitant about it that she put a virtual choke hold on the sushi when picking it up. The *nori* just barely managed to keep it together as she stuffed the whole piece into her dainty mouth.

One bite was all it took for her eyes to shoot open.

And thus, the promised "serious conversation" between the Earthling and her three space-alien acquaintances didn't begin for another two hours.

"...Sixty-five," Chiho whispered after counting up the empty dishes on the table, the combined effort of all four of them.

"I wanna live in this country, Eme."

“Yesss, I don’t wanna go home eitherrr...”

With Albert’s sizable frame, his knack for packing it away was understandable. However, even the diminutive Emeralda had whizzed through the plates at such a pace that nobody was sure where it all went inside her body.

Out of the stack of sixty-five, Chiho was responsible for only six, holding back a bit since it was on Emi’s tab. Emi made it to ten, a respectable figure for a young woman, but considering Emeralda and Albert had basically split the rest evenly, Emi’s performance was essentially a blip.

“Not to ask after we’re done ’n’ everything,” Albert asked Emi as he sipped his tea, “but yer *sure* we eat *this* much of all these amazin’ delicacies and it’d *still* amount t’just one Airenian silver?”

“Mmm, maybe two by now.”

Emi chuckled, clearly not expecting to see this, as Emeralda slumped against her seat in a state of pure bliss.

“That hundred-yen thing most be worth a lottt... I’ve never eaten a slice of caaake that was so velvety, so taaasty, without being too sweet. The cake at the palace is just *nothing* but sugarrrr...”

Besides the sushi, Emeralda had copiously availed herself of the à la carte menu, from French fries and other snacks to miso soup to *chawanmushi* savory egg custard, all the way into the dessert menu. The chocolate cake was a particularly big hit with her; Emi wasn’t fully paying attention, but she seemed to remember three slices in a row on her placemat.



“And you can enjoy a slice for five Vesian coppers apiiiiece? I find that faaar too difficult to believe. If you searched for a cake like this in Saint Aire, where would you even *gooo*; how much would they even *aaask* for it...?”

Emeralda was heaping it with praise, but to Chiho a hundred-yen cake was, well, a hundred-yen cake. She recalled a pastry shop near her house that was both better than this and still reasonably priced. It made her wonder what Emeralda would do if she ever took her there.

“Did you have enough, Chiho?” Emi asked.

“...I dunno, just looking at your two friends kind of filled me up.”

Chiho wasn't a particularly light eater, but even making allowances for that, the sight of Emeralda and Albert's eating spree was enough to overwhelm her.

“I hear you,” Emi said. She looked at them, took another sip of tea, then sat back up in her seat. “By the way, sorry if this is too sudden, but does it seem like there's something...different about us from you? Like, from your perspective? I mean, besides the capacities of their stomachs, I guess.”

“...Huh?”

Chiho blinked. It *was* too sudden.

“I haven't forgotten that we had stuff to talk about, so... I know we kind of ate a lot first, but...”

“Ha-ha! Sorry 'bout that.”

“It was so goooooood...”

Neither of them seemed too apologetic, as Chiho finally recalled what brought them all to this restaurant.

“Well, me, and Eme and Al as well... We're all people, just like you. I mean, I guess I'm half-angel, but given how much these two can apparently eat, they're a lot closer to monster-class than I am.”

“Y-yeah...”

Realizing Emi was trying to steer their talk in a constructive direction, Chiho sat up as well, sipping her tea. Albert and Emeralda were still sprawled out

across their seats.

“The reason,” Emi began, “why they were so suspicious about sushi is because in our world, working-class people would never see raw fish on the dinner table. There isn’t the distribution network or freezer technology you see in Japan, so instead, fish gets smoked or salted, then cooked like that. And even that’s considered a high-ticket meal where I’m from. *Maybe* you’d get to enjoy it once a year.”

Chiho recalled visiting the house where her father grew up, out in the mountains. Every time she stopped by for New Year’s or other events, there’d always be a feast waiting, topped off by an entire yellowtail right in the middle. A tradition dating back to when saltwater fish were a rare luxury, apparently.

“But, you know, that’s the kind of nation we grew up in. So maybe it’d be easier to understand if you thought about it this way, Chiho: All of us, we came from a nation you’ve never heard of before. One that’s got no relation at all to Japan; one where the technology is seriously lagging behind.”

Considering there was “no relation,” their Japanese language ability was astonishingly fluent. But now was no time to point that out.

“And the name of that nation...or that world...”

“Right. Ente Isla, the Land of the Holy Cross. We were pursuing the Devil King, this tyrant laying waste to Ente Isla, and that’s what brought us here. And that Devil King is the Sadao Maou you know.”

Chiho immediately felt something heavy in the pit of her stomach. It wasn’t because she had scarfed down two enormous seafood-salad *gunkan* rolls, egged on by Albert’s virtuoso eating performance. It was that Maou’s name sounded like some far-off echo in her mind.

“Ms. Yusa... Oh, and your name, actually, Emi Yusa...”

Just as she tried to ask, Chiho remembered that it wasn’t her real name at all. It stopped her in her tracks.

“You can still call me that. I’m intending to stay here in Japan for a while to come, and it’ll be weird for me if you call me Emilia in public.” Emi shrugged. “Chiho, I...I think I understand what’s troubling you right now, to some extent.

But from my standpoint, I can't really decide whether I should help you solve it or not."

Her voice turned a measure harsher.

"We're here in Sasazuka right now for the demons, partly, but more than that, because we wanted to see you and find something out for sure, Chiho."

"Find something out?"

"Yeah. You know who we really are, along with Sadao Maou. And the Devil King's left only your memories intact, out of everybody in this entire world."

Chiho swallowed nervously. That was one concern she hadn't been able to wipe away from her heart. Why was Maou handling her memories, and only her memories, with such special care?

"So I want you to think about what that means while we explain to you how the Devil King and I wound up in Japan. Some of it might be hard for you to deal with. If you don't want to hear it, that's fine."

Emi flashed looks at Emeraldalda and Albert. They were still rubbing their bellies, but their eyes remained scarily serious.

"What do you think? Will you listen to the story about our battle against Maou—the Devil King—and how he appeared in our world, and I rose up against him as the Hero, and that's all still going on up to today? I don't want to repeat myself, but it's definitely not light subject matter. If you don't want to hear it, then—"

"Please. Let's do it."

Chiho didn't let her finish.

"...Are you sure?"

"I really want to know. I want to know whether the Sadao Maou I know is real...or not."

The moment she said it, Emeraldalda and Albert exchanged glances.

"Like, where did he come from, what did he do... What kind of person he really is."

“Well, seein’ the Devil King Satan getting bossed around in some low-end restaurant, I sure *hope* that ain’t the real thing.”

“Now’s not the time for jokes, Al.”

The sight of Albert all too easily stating the facts Emi chose not to voice stiffened Chiho’s expression.

“All right. So let’s start at the beginning. And, again, if you’re having second thoughts about it, we can stop at any time. That’s how hard some of this might be.”

Chiho gave her a resolute nod.

“Okay.”

“Right. So...”

Sensing the resolve Chiho put on the table, Emi began to speak clearly to her.

“It was about seven years ago that the Devil King led a gigantic army of demons into Ente Isla. I was ten at the time.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re only one year older than I am?!”

She interrupted almost immediately, unable to hide her surprise at the answer simple math gave her. Emi tried to keep going, but after a couple of false starts, she brought a hand to her forehead.

“...I’ll refrain from asking what you were so surprised about. I’ll talk about my age and how it relates to my work later, so if you could just listen for a bit...”

“Oh, um, sorry.”

Chiho recognized that her astonished response had signaled that Emi looked far older than her chronological age.

“Anyway,” Emi said with a cough, “the entire world fought against the Devil King’s Army. They lost, and all the nations fell under the demons’ rule. And on the day the army led by Lucifer—the little guy who kidnapped you—reached my village, I was named the Hero destined to defeat the Devil King. Me, this farm girl who knew nothing about the world.”

The greatest surprise for Chiho, after she heard it all, was how little it affected

her heart in the end. Emi was giving a recital of sorts, deliberately (to Chiho's ears) keeping her own emotions away from it. Apart from the day when the Devil King's Army took her father's life, Emi worked hard to describe her journey as just a chronological list of events. The battle between humans and demons on Ente Isla. The four Great Demon Generals (Ashiya included) who invaded human lands. The Devil King Satan leading them. The tragic aftereffects they saw throughout their travels. The human world rallying back to the attack. The final battle between the Hero's team and Satan, accompanied by his general Alciel, in the Devil's Castle. Emi's unexpected, accidental (or so it seemed) journey to Japan. She and the Devil King reuniting in Sasazuka.

"Thiiinking about it," an apologetic-looking Emeralda chimed in from the side, "maybe this wasn't the kind of talk we should've had after a meeeal."

She and Albert had spent the entire conversation trying to read what was written on Chiho's face, no doubt worried that it was all too sensational for her to swallow without feeling sick to her stomach. Chiho *was* amazed, but only at how much less of a shock it was than she'd imagined.

"You all right?" Albert gently asked. "You don't feel bad or anything?"

Chiho shook her head in a natural motion. "I'm fine, thank you." A deep breath. "But can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"So the first time you all met the Devil King Satan was at that duel in the Devil's Castle?"

""...?"""

No answer. For a moment, Emi, Albert, and Emeralda all exchanged questioning looks. They weren't expecting this one.

"No," Emi finally replied, "that was when we liberated Ente Isla's Eastern Island, when he came to approve the retreat of Alciel's forces. I think that was the first time."

"So the Devil's Castle was the second time?"

"...Yeah."

Chiho nodded, seemingly convinced of something, as the other three silently puzzled over her. They had no idea what she found so reassuring about that reply.

“Well,” she continued, unaware of this, “thank you for going over all of that for me. To be honest, it all hardly seems real to me, but given what I saw back at the station, I know you guys can’t be lying.”

It took courage to say that. But with this trio, there was no need to hold back now. Chiho took another breath to quiet her heartbeat.

“Can I ask one more question, though?”

She eyed all three of them in order.

“Is it all right if...I still love Maou?”



“Hwaaaahhh!”

Emeralda’s eyes sparkled like a young child’s as she audibly gawked at the glass showcase. Inside were lines of colorful cakes, the kind that Chiho’s family thought of when the word “cake” came to mind. This is what Patisserie Tiron sold, and they had a great rep for them across the neighborhood.

“They’re soooooooooooooooooo *cuuuuuuuuuuuute*!!”

They were the traditional chocolate, strawberry, and Mont Blanc cakes, along with a decent variety of daily specials you wouldn’t expect to see in a non-chain neighborhood bakery. Space was limited, so the selection couldn’t live up to the big guys’, but today the focus was on the fruit tart and chocolate cake family.

“E-E-Emilia, how many can I buuuuuuy?!”

“You ain’t a child, y’know,” Albert retorted.

He may have been turned off by Emeralda’s regression into childhood begging, but Emeralda couldn’t have cared less.

“Hey, did you hear that? That big buffoon over there doesn’t waaant any. Can I buy more if he iiisn’t?”

“Buffoon...?”

“Eme, calm down. You can’t buy all of them. Do you have any recommendations, Chiho?”

Before Chiho could reply to Emi’s motherly bout of common sense, Emeraldalda’s smile promptly turned into a frown.

“Awwwwwww! C’mon, let’s buy them allllll!”

“I don’t have infinite money to work with!”

“I tolld you, when I go back home, I’ll send all kinds of stuff over for youuu!”

“Oh, sure. Money I can’t use in Japan, jewelry that’d look weird on a call-center lady... I really don’t need it, thanks.”

Despite how it looked, Emeraldalda was much older than Emi. But an impartial observer would be pardoned for thinking that Emi was her older sister or something.

“Well,” Chiho said as she started pointing things out, “in terms of what I like, you can’t go wrong with the Swiss rolls, but they have a lot of different types of cream puffs, too. Also, that raccoon-dog cake is pretty neat...”

“Raccoon dog? Are these saaavory cakes?!”

“No, they sculpt it with chocolate and marzipan to make it look kind of like a raccoon dog. There, on the far end—”

“Aaaaaaahhh! So *cuuuuuuuute*! Emiliaaaaaaa!”

“...All right, that’ll be one. Now, one more. You sure you’re fine, Al?”

“Yeah. Go ahead ’n’ let that kid down there have another.”

Albert was still smarting from the “buffoon” remark earlier. Emeraldalda was unfazed as she stared intently at the showcase.

“Mmmm, one mooore...hmmm...”

It was evening by now, there at the 100 Trees Shopping Arcade, and Chiho had suggested buying a small cake or two as souvenirs. Not to badmouth that sushi place, but she couldn’t allow Emeraldalda to labor under the misconception that *that* was the standard for cake in Japan. Now Emeraldalda was adrift in a world of colorful icing, savoring the reverie.

“Kind of surprising, though,” observed Emi from behind.

“What’s that?”

“I didn’t think you’d ask me that.” She smiled. “I mean, once I gave you the whole truth, I didn’t think you’d want to be involved with any of us, much less take Eme to a cake shop afterward.”

“Well,” came the clearly spoken reply, “if you didn’t all give me that answer, I probably wouldn’t be here right now.”

It made Emi give her a wide-eyed look.

“Um...maybe, but what else could I have said?”

“Exactly,” said Chiho, full of enthusiasm. “And that’s why I thought I needed to show this place off to you!”



“Is it all right if...I still love Maou?”

Emi silently pondered the question for a few moments, then gave her this reply:

“None of us can take those feelings away from you.”

“Y’know,” Albert interjected, “when Emilia said she wasn’t goin’ home and she wasn’t gonna kill the Devil King, I was pretty damn gutted. But y’know, lady, at this point, things’re calmed down enough that I can see it ain’t fair we got ya involved in all our stuff. Bein’ honest with ya for a minute, if you *did* forget everything for us, nobody’d miss the Devil King if we pulverized ’im. He’d be dead, we’d all live happily ever after, there ya go.”

“You’re going too far agaaain.” Albert, all too eager to tell the truth, received this rebuke from Emeralda. “Of course,” she went on to Chiho, “we caaan’t support you, not really, and if the Devil King tries anything daaangerous, then the lives and safety of the people around him will take precedence over your feelings, Chiho.”

“Right,” agreed Emi as she neatly divided the sushi plates into stacks of ten for easier counting. “Me, Eme, Al... We’re not in the business of making our friends cry. It’s our fault we let the Devil King escape from us and into this

world; you had nothing to do with that. So if, after you heard all of that, you still think you love him... Well, there's no need to worry about us. It's your feelings—you should decide them for yourself."



"Okay, so we're going back to Ente Isla tomorrowww..."

"Yeah, keep an eye on Emilia for us, won'tcha?"

They were at the turnstile in front of Sasazuka station, Emeraldalda beaming because she was carrying a box full of the numerous cakes she had managed to wheedle out of Emilia. Albert looked down at her, a defeated smile on his face, as they said their good-byes to Chiho.

"This is a really nice country, y'know? Good food, lots of money, all that kinda thing. And good people, too—like you, little lady. Emilia oughta relax here a while, I'd say. Take a load off."

Albert stole a glance at Emi, currently staring at the ticket board to figure out how much to spend on train fare for Emeraldalda and Albert.

"You're the first real friend she's made apart from us. I'm very happy to see that."

"Oh?"

The lack of Emeraldalda's trademark drawl drew Chiho's attention.

"I hate to just leave the Devil King unchecked," Albert continued, "but... I dunno. Him leaving yer memories alone really says a lot to me, somehow."

"Emilia's face has gotten briiiighter than I've ever seen it, and I'm suuure it's because she ran into you and the Devil King here, in Japaaan. I know we said a lot of mean thiiings to you, but be a good friend to her, all riiight?"

And now she was back to normal.

Chiho had no way of reading what was behind her words. Emi was posing as a twenty-year-old in Japan so she'd qualify as an adult for job purposes, but in reality, she was seventeen, a mere year older than Chiho. A seventeen-year-old girl with the fate of an entire world on her shoulders, crossing barriers between entire planets, all because of this battle thrust upon her. It'd be impossible to

make Chiho fully understand the sheer fecklessness of the people on Ente Isla, forcing her to handle this fate all by herself. Emeraldal knew all that talk hadn't fazed her much, so she refrained from saying anything further and dropped the serious look.

"Besiiides," she said, drawing close to her, "I really don't thiiink you have much to worry abouuut."

"Emeralda?"

"I think the Devil Kiiing wanted you to remember him, too, Chihooo. So don't let it get to you muuuch. Just give it tiime, little by little, and you'll figure it ouuut."

"You, you, you think so?"

"Ahh, don't pay too much attention to Eme. Ya really don't wanna rely on her promises in a— *Nngh!*"

The silent toe kick put Albert in a world of pain, enough so to make even Chiho cower in fear as Eme returned with two tickets.

"All right. I don't have enough money left on my card to cover all of you, so I had to buy separate tickets. What were you talking about, though?"

"N-nothing...*ugghh*..."

"Oh, I just told her to take good care of you, Emiiiilia."

"Yeah? Well, we better get going. Sorry to take up so much of your time today, Chiho."

"Oh, not at all." Chiho shook her head—then, for some reason, her eyes met Emeraldal's as she was headed for the turnstile with Eme. "...Oh! Right! Wait, Ms. Yusa!"

"Mm? What's up?"

She didn't understand what Emeraldal's advice just now meant. But somehow, she felt now was the time to conduct that one true ceremony of friendship—one that came far more naturally to her than it would to Eme on her world.

"Your phone number..."

She took out her flip phone.

“Oh, that’s a Dokodemo PN-04iS, Flower Pink version, right?”

A glance at the rear panel was enough for Emi, call-center employee for a national phone provider, to guess Chiho’s model. All that talk about her being the Hero of another world still didn’t seem very convincing to her. It made Chiho laugh a bit as she took a breath and looked Emi in the eye.

“Do you wanna trade phone numbers, or e-mails, or something?”

“...Huh?”

“I...I still don’t know if I can figure any of this out yet. I think it’s gonna take some time for me to deal with all my concerns. And I know I might be a pain, but...I want to know more. I want to hear about all kinds of other stuff. I want to talk with you about Ente Isla, about Maou, and...about you. About Emilia Justina.”

“Chiho...”

The unexpected offer made Emi stop in her tracks.

“I mean...if you don’t mind...”

This was Emilia Justina—fearing for demons by night, thirsting for revenge by day, polishing her blade across multiple worlds, even hiding her true self in pursuit of her goals.

“...would you like to be friends?”

And this was Chiho Sasaki—raised in a sheltered world, about to take a step toward another one that nobody else on Earth was even faintly aware of.

“I’d love to.”

Two girls from very different worlds gripped each other’s hands firmly.



THE DEVIL LOOKS BACK ON THE FRUGAL LIFE

THE DEVIL LOOKS BACK ON THE FRUGAL LIFE

The 100 Trees Shopping Arcade was alive with activity that evening, full of consumers and those citizens returning home from school or work via Sasazuka Station.

Suzuno Kamazuki, deftly flowing through the crowds and carefully perusing the day's dinner offerings, suddenly recognized a man nearby—someone who, despite her smaller size, she had no problem spotting, given the way he stood a good head above his surroundings. He wasn't the type of person Suzuno would lob a friendly hello at if she met him on the street, but they *were* neighbors back at the apartment—and he had a nose for bargains that she couldn't ignore.

"May as well speak up," she muttered as she kept her eyes on the back of Shirou Ashiya's head. But as she approached one of the tenants at Room 201 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka, she noticed something strange.

"Hmm? I thought that store was vacated not long ago... What is he doing?"

Ashiya was standing there, in an apparent trance, in front of a shuttered storefront. He was on the far side of the street and thus not in anyone's way, but this was decidedly abnormal behavior for Ashiya.

"*What* are you doing, Shirou?" Suzuno asked as she drew closer.

He had two shopping bags in his hands, one the reusable grocery bag he always had with him and the other an unusually large paper bag that contained something heavy-looking.

"Shirou? Shirou..."

Ashiya didn't turn around at the sound of his repeated name. Suzuno was about the only person in Japan to call him by his first name. Perhaps he didn't recognize it, she thought—so, within the murmuring of the crowd, she finally

steeled her resolve and used his *real* name.

“Alciel!”

“.....Ah. Crestia Bell.”

Finally, he turned toward her. But something was clearly off. His eyes were unfocused, and him using *her* own real name on a public street was something the normally cautious Ashiya would never do.

“Wh-what’s become of you? Have you taken ill?”

It honestly worried her—that is, the thought of herself having honest concern for Ashiya, whom she had increasingly been treating as just another face in the neighborhood, what they were to each other totally forgotten.

“This...”

With a shaky hand, he lifted up the heavy-looking bag in his right hand.

“Mm? What? What is there inside...?”

The mouth of the bag was wide open. Suzuno peered in.

“I won,” came the wavering voice from above, making Suzuno turn her head up before she could read the lettering on the box inside the paper bag.

“What?”

“I thought it would never happen... That it was all just a fantasy...”

Ashiya—who himself would be considered a fantasy creature to most people on Earth, much less Japan—slowly turned his eyes forward. Suzuno followed his gaze, only to find a white tent in a corner of the path, labeled 100 TREES SHOPPING ARCADE LOTTERY BLAST.

“...Wait. Alciel, are you moping around here because...?”

Already Suzuno was struck by the rapidly approaching conclusion that having even a moment’s concern for Ashiya was an idiotic decision on her part. She looked into the bag again. There was a sturdy-looking cardboard box inside, labeled D-FAR 4-LITER PRESSURE COOKER.

She sighed.

The group that gathered in Room 201 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka that evening felt a slight twinge of pity for Ashiya, as he all but rubbed cheek to cheek with the cooker's silvery body. Alciel, the Great Demon General who'd made one of Ente Isla's four great continents fall upon its knees and beg for mercy, was practically doing a little jig over winning a pressure cooker at a free shopping-center drawing. To Emi Yusa—who had traveled across worlds as Emilia the Hero to pursue him and his cohorts—the sight couldn't have been more sorrowful.

“Um, Devil King? Lucifer? Doesn't this embarrass you at all, having this take place in your room?”

“Uhh...”

Sadao Maou, better known to Emi as the Devil King Satan, kept his head down and his lips pursed under her withering gaze.

“And *you!*” Suzuno went on at Lucifer. “Merely winning a pressure cooker was enough to put him into an unconscious stupor. He is working his fingers to the bone to support you both. Could you at least give him a single moment of thanks?”

“Yeah, uh... Yeah.”

Hanzou Urushihara, aka the Great Demon General Lucifer, let out an annoyed-sounding retort to the lecture.

“You must sure be happy,” marveled Chiho Sasaki, the only human on Earth aware of Maou's and Emi's true identities.

“Makes 'im happy?” squeaked the little girl of the group.

“Yep,” Chiho agreed down at Alas Ramus, the daughter of the Hero and Devil King. “This cooker, you know, if you buy it, it's really expensive.”

It would be an uphill battle to make the child understand Ashiya's abject glee—and Maou himself, unable to withstand the withering blows from Emi and Suzuno, gave Ashiya a wry smile over it.

“Well, um... Yeah. Sorry we've, uh, put you through a lot.”

“What are you saying, Your Demonic Highness?! In light of the monumental events of the day, I have been put through nothing! *Nothing!!*”

The compliment added even more sparkle to Ashiya's smile as he brought the new and blindingly shiny pressure cooker to the sink and began rinsing it for use with tonight's dinner.

"I don't know what kind of stuff he's had to deal with," Emi shouted out from behind, "but how hard *was* it, if all I needed to take down a Great Demon General was a pressure cooker?"

Nobody could defy her on that point. Anyone who knew Ashiya personally was aware that a new kitchen appliance would have an incalculably serious impact on his househusbanding activities. But anyone that close to him would undoubtedly be troubled, as well, by this performance. Was it really that hard for him, such that a simple pot with a plug was enough to leave him in bliss? Or, on the other hand, were his expectations really just that low?

"She said it was expensive," a dubious-looking Urushihara chimed in as he examined the empty box in his hands, "but how much does one of those actually cost?"

"Oh," interjected Chiho as Maou looked toward the box, "even the small ones cost a good ten thousand yen or so."

""Ten thousand yen?!"" Urushihara and Maou screamed.

The box fell out of Urushihara's hands as Maou's jaw almost fell to the floor.

"Ten thousand yen for a pot? What the hell, dude?!"

"This is *that* expensive?!"

Emi picked up the box from the shocked demons. "Ten thousand's on the cheap side, actually. This is a four-liter cooker, so I'd have to guess it'd cost twenty thousand yen or so."

"Twenty thousand yen?!" Maou shrilled again, half-rising from his seat on the floor. "Wow. Hey, if it's worth that much, maybe we should sell it for the money and—"

"We will *not*!" barked Ashiya, apparently lending a sensitive ear to the conversation all along. "Household goods like these go for a pittance on the secondhand market, even unused! I refuse to let go of this!"

“All right, all right! Just thought I’d suggest it...”

Maou had to very hurriedly take it back, following Ashiya’s threat.

“I’ve been wanting to try braising some pork for so long now! And with a pot this big, I could do things like French *pot-au-feu*, and stews, and things... Ahh, the possibilities are endless!”

“Do you think one of those possibilities might be giving up on conquering the world?” Emi interjected.

“Wow, Ashiya, you’re literally glowing!” Chiho added.

“I see things have been very, very difficult for you, Alciel,” Suzuno offered.

It was with deep sympathy, among other things, that the three women gave their statements.

“Don’t *you* go touching that pot, Urushihara,” Maou instructed. “If you break that thing, we’re both dead.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. Ashiya’s scarin’ me today, dude.”

Both of the other residents who made up Devil’s Castle seemed a bit taken aback by their demon general’s unusual behavior.

“But you’re going to make something with it right now, Ashiya?”

“Well, I guess he’s done a lot of research in cookbooks and stuff by now. A twenty-thousand-yen pot, though...” Maou looked at the appliances in the kitchen. “Hey, didn’t we buy our frying pan for, like, seven hundred yen at the grocery store?”

“Indeed we did, my liege. My cutting knife was about fifteen hundred, perhaps? I’ve sharpened it so often, it’s worn rather thin, I’m afraid. A pressure cooker, to me, is like a dream within a dream.” He began drying it off with a washcloth. “When we bought that oil-filtering pot, I thought that would be it appliance-wise, for space reasons. This is truly a wonderful day.”

Every word Ashiya uttered was aflame with the intense joy the pressure cooker brought him. There was no way he could hide it.

“When we first arrived in Japan, if I recall, we were so restricted in our kitchen

utensils that we had trouble sticking to even the most bare-bones of frugal budgets.”

“Frugal? How do you mean?”

Emi looked up at the puzzled Suzuno. “Well, for example, taking the white radish sprouts you’d normally throw away and using them in something else, right? Alas Ramus likes onion tea, so I’ve been saving onion skins lately, too.”



“Onion...tea?”

Maou raised an eyebrow, the two words not quite linking together in his mind. Ashiya, of course, knew exactly what she meant.

“Ah, boiling the brown-colored skins for their flavor? I understand people drink it with sugar and honey.”

“And it’s okay for kids to drink that? I thought honey was bad for babies.”

Maou gave Alas Ramus a rub on the head, resulting in a ticklish smile.

“Anh! Daddy, no mussing meee!”

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” retorted Emi. “I’m keeping tabs to make sure she doesn’t eat too much. And infant botulism only affects babies under twelve months, before their intestines fully develop.”

“Well, radish sprouts and onion tea are doable enough,” reflected Ashiya. “If one *truly* seeks to be frugal, many of the finer practices can’t be done without the right kitchen environment. Deep-frying the pods that *edamame* beans come in is a good example.”

Chiho’s eyes burst open. “You can eat edamame pods?!”

“Aren’t you more concerned that these demons *thought* about eating edamame pods?” Emi asked, surprised for a different reason.

“Normally, we would not, of course. But you see a great deal of frugal recipes like those, invented as a way to make what we’d usually throw away more palatable for eating.”

Ashiya was already peeling an onion as he spoke.

“With fried edamame pods, first you’d remove the stems and fibers on the top and bottom. Then you cut the pods in half, bread them with wheat flour, then fry them up. They say it is rather simple. But,” he continued as he began chopping up some potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables, “with how much breading and frying oil it uses, it would be rather like putting the cart before the horse for us, back then.”

In those early days, freshly arrived in Japan and seriously penniless, Maou and

Ashiya's definition of "frugal" meant not only using cheap ingredients, but also avoiding anything that used the Big five seasonings in Japanese cuisine (salt, sugar, vinegar, soy sauce, and miso) or required well near anything one could define as "cookware."

Frying requires a lot of cooking oil; use it once, and it can easily be oxidized by flour and other impurities, making it unusable unless stored appropriately. Since the idea of throwing away cooking oil was unthinkable in Devil's Castle, they needed a setup that could recycle large amounts of oil if they wanted to fry anything—but that would require a heat-resistant filtering pot or strainer, along with the discipline to use the oil for some other fried dish before it deteriorated. It required concerted effort. Eating things you'd normally toss out (like edamame pods) might seem like a money-saver at first blush, but if you already barely had two coins to rub together, you couldn't really set up the environment you needed for it.

"In addition to that, one cannot use the same pot for both frying and regular cooking, or else it will shorten its lifespan. Washing them requires more soap as well. Besides, purchasing new seasonings and such because you want to be 'frugal' would be the height of folly. No, *true* home cooking lies in making the most of whatever's in your refrigerator, crafting recipes that don't require a great investment over the long term and—"

"All right already! I got it! I'm sorry!"

Emi hadn't done anything wrong, but she apologized anyway. It was the only way to get Ashiya off his lengthy diatribe on frugal living.

"For what? I thought you might be interested in the kind of dishes you can make with one frying pan and one cutting knife."

"I'm fine, thank you! Look, I know Alas Ramus is looking forward to whatever you make with that thing, so hurry up and do it!"

Ashiya nodded, noticing the child's gaze upon him. "Mm. Very well. Patience, please. This is my first attempt, so I must proceed with caution. Let me put in... just a little consommé to begin, then?"

"Huh." Maou smirked at his ever-passionate general. "Yeah, we seriously had our hands full with day-to-day survival at first. I don't think Ashiya got serious

about cooking until after I scored the McGonald gig.”

After the two of them had been defeated by Emi and found themselves washed up in Japan, they arrived with literally nothing. Without the generosity of Miki Shiba, landlord of the Villa Rosa Sasazuka apartment building, they’d been in serious danger of dying from malnutrition.

“We ate stuff like broccoli stalks all the time back then. We begged the supermarkets for the cabbage leaves they threw away. And the bean sprouts. Ohhh, man, all those bean sprouts!”

Broccoli stalks were edible enough once you peeled the harder skin off and cubed them. With cabbage, as long as you removed the outer leaves and damaged bits, they were fine for soups, salads, and stir-fry. Truly, a pair of jacks-of-all-trades. And if you showed up at the grocery on the right day, you could buy a whole box of bean sprouts for ten yen each. Filling *and* highly nutritious.

They had eaten a lot of the vegetable refuse Emi mentioned, and they weren’t afraid to try purchasing all kinds of cheap food castoffs, from discarded bread crusts to *okara*, the soybean dregs that are a by-product of tofu production. Thanks to all that effort, they (almost) never had to sleep on an empty stomach.

“...Dude, I am *not* gonna live like that,” Urushihara warned.

“Well, even then, Ashiya worked pretty hard to make all kinds of stuff, so we weren’t in as much poverty as it sounded.” Maou accentuated the point by giving his other general a light kick on the back. For someone like Urushihara, who had never had a taste of the good old days around the new Devil’s Castle, Maou felt a reminder was in order. “You oughta thank him, you parasite. It’s thanks to Ashiya’s frugal living that you can live high on the hog over there.”

“...Can I help you with anything, Ashiya?” Chiho suddenly asked, standing up and moving away from the demons’ conversation.

Ashiya turned around and smiled. “Oh, do you mind? I have two tomatoes at the bottom of the refrigerator—could you peel them in hot water for me? You can use that pot over there.” He motioned toward the pot with his eyes.

“...I think I will go cut up some of the *tsukemono* vegetables,” Suzuno pronounced, standing up. “They are store-bought, but I found a maker I’ve taken a fancy to lately.”

Thus she left the room, promising a little something extra on the table for them all.

Meanwhile, in the midst of all this, Alas Ramus was looking straight up at Emi.

“Wh-what, Alas Ramus?”

“What ’bout you, Mommy?”

“Huh?”

“Aren’tcha gonna help?”

“Um...”

The child’s pure, innocent eyes stunned Emi into silence. She must’ve assumed Emi would do something, if Chiho and Suzuno were already under way. Sadly, Emi had brought nothing to add to the menu.

“...What?”

“Hmm? Nothing.”

She could see Maou’s self-satisfied expression from the corner of her eye. Enjoying the sight of Emi struggling under the weight of Alas Ramus’s forlorn eyes, no doubt. She bottled up her welling anger.

“...I’ll make something this time, too,” she said, more to the entire room than to her daughter.

“Yeah? Well, don’t kill yourself over it. You’re always straight here from work.”

Whenever she participated in these human-and-demon dinner parties at Devil’s Castle—a regular event now, though she never meant it to be—Emi usually did so after a call-center shift. Even if she did cook something at home, it was too much of a pain to return home to fetch it, or carry it around with her at work all day.

“You know, Alas Ramus, Mommy’s really tryin’ hard today, all right? More

than you'd think," Maou offered as he picked the little girl up.

"What do you mean, 'more than you'd think'?!"

But Maou ignored the rebuttal to his accusation. "Hey, Alas Ramus, can you do me a favor and ask Lucifer to help out, too?"

"Don't get *me* involved, dude."

Alas Ramus stared at the peeved fallen angel for several seconds with her big eyes. Then she lightly shook her head, looking a bit distressed as she looked back up at her "father."

"Daddy, Lushifell won't helllp..."

"""" ...!""""

Everyone else in the room stopped breathing for a moment, Urushihara audibly hissing "What?!" and turning back toward the toddler.

By the time Suzuno came back with a small bowl of pickled vegetables, everybody except Urushihara was uncontrollably laughing, the man himself beet-red and shivering as Alas Ramus just blankly looked at them all. Suzuno didn't know what was up, but one thing was clear—she had just missed something hilarious.

"Wow, Lucifer, are you all right with Alas Ramus saying that? Hee-hee-hee..."

"Nnnnhh!!"

Emi's teasing made him even redder.

"*Don't ask!!*" he shouted at Suzuno, who was standing by the front door. Then: ".....All right," came a voice like a mosquito's cry. "I'll wash the dishes, okay? All of 'em except the pressure cooker..."

"I must have missed something quite interesting indeed," Suzuno said, growing curious about what could possibly make Urushihara volunteer for chores. "How frustrating. Could someone explain what happened?"

"I *said* not to ask, dudette!!"

Any more prodding was liable to make him lash out at just about anyone by now.

“A child’s eyes are pretty crazy things, huh?” Maou asked.

“They sure are,” Emi agreed, as she and the Devil King thought about the incredible wisdom hiding behind Alas Ramus’s gaze.

“I’m done peeling the tomatoes, ha-h-ha...” Chiho had been smiling the whole time she’d been working, but not even she could keep a laugh from erupting out at the end.

“Thank you, Ms. Sasaki. And don’t worry about washing, Urushihara,” Ashiya said. “But can you switch on the rice cooker for me? You can do that much, I imagine.”

“Stop picking on me, dude! Seriously, you’re pissing me off!!”

His shoulders were pinned back in anger as he meekly turned it on. It made a little beep as it began cooking the rice that both humans and demons would enjoy in this room shortly. The steam and aroma from both it and the pressure cooker soon filled the apartment as everyone hurried around to prepare the table and mark the end to just another day in Sasazuka.

**THE
DEVIL
SNAGS A
NEW
PHONE
WITH THE
HERO'S
MONEY**



THE DEVIL SNAGS A NEW PHONE WITH THE HERO'S MONEY

“Hello! How can I—”

“Can you do anything with this?”

“—help you today— *Uhm?*”

Emi could see the salesman visibly tense up before he could finish his opening pitch with a smile. She couldn't blame him. The pile of scrap metal and plastic Maou had just presented to him was just barely recognizable as a cell phone. But it was the salesman's job to handle customers as they walked into the door of his AE shop, and as the public face of the store he did his level best to force the smile back on his face. *A real pro*, an astonished Emi thought.

“Oh, um, I'm sorry, sir, were you...looking for some repair work...?”

“Well, if you can. It still powers on, so I figured we could do something with it.”

“...Yeah, right,” Emi whispered, softly enough so no one could hear.

“Uhmm, well, I wouldn't suggest you try turning that on right now. You might have the battery discharge and electrocute you, sir.”

The salesman looked a little shocked himself.

“B-but we'll be happy to take a look at it, so, um, if you could just take a number and wait over there for a few moments...”

“Oh, sure. Guess we're out of luck, huh?”

“I told you this was stupid.”

“Huh? Uh...oh.”

A final tug from Emi was all it took to dissuade Maou from hounding the salesman any further. Maou headed deeper into the shop, not even glancing at the state-of-the-art new models lining the shelves, and plopped himself down

on a sofa.

“Mommy! Mommy, it’s your job!”

In Emi’s arms was Alas Ramus—the personification of the Yesod Sephirah and daughter of Emi and Maou—and she was pointing at the front counter with one arm and batting Emi’s shoulder with the other. Two AE employees were there, dressed in prim uniforms with large ribbons over the chest, and each of them was dealing with their own customer at the moment.

“...Yeah.”

Emi nodded back, even though it was a little bitter for her to accept. Up until fairly recently she had worked in the phone industry herself, albeit in a different company and position. Looking back at her career so far, the fact that the ex-call center receptionist Hero was in no position to criticize the Devil King about working at MgRonald would’ve made her giggle if it wasn’t so depressing.

“Mommy, d’you work tomorrow?”

The innocent question rubbed a bit more salt on Emi’s wounds. With Alas Ramus an inseparable part of the holy sword Emi wielded, the Hero had worked that whole time at Dokodemo with the child fused inside her heart. This gave Alas Ramus an insider’s view of Emi’s workplace.

“...No, I’m going to be away from Dokodemo for a while.”

It was a very motherly lie to tell one’s daughter. Emi had been fired from her previous place of employment—which was entirely due to her own behavior, so there was little complaining to be done about it. But losing the niche she had eked out for herself in Japan was still at least a somewhat scarring experience. Thinking back on it, it felt like she had come very far—both in terms of time and her situation—from the day she traveled to Japan to take the Devil King’s head.

“You don’t have to stay with me here, Emi,” Maou said on the sofa, apparently noticing her eyes on him but not bothering to return the gaze.

“...Huh?”

“I mean, I’ll give you a copy of the receipt and everything, so, uh, if you just give me the money later...”

He was being deliberately blunt with her, but Emi could easily figure out that he was trying to be considerate of her unemployment. It was excessive, unwelcomingly so. She already knew that she owed Maou, big-time.

“...I can’t do that,” she said with a sniff, before sitting a prudent distance away from Maou on the same sofa. “I still haven’t gotten a new job yet. I could wind up at a call center or store run by AE, or SoftTank, or whatever. I need to scope out the other players in the field a little.”

“Oh? Mm.”

Maou awkwardly nodded, not taking the topic any further. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere except here, and the same could be said for his seating partner.

“So which phone are you going for next?”

“Um? Oh, uhh...”

He looked down at the junked phone in his hand. Emi knew he was still clinging to that hope, for some reason.

“I told you,” she said, “they’re never gonna offer repairs for that. It’s already a super-old model. I’m shocked you could still charge it. The shell’s in pieces.”

“Aww...”

He gave the pile of parts a forlorn look. The AE phone model in his possession was actually sold by Joose’d Mobile, before AE bought them out. That happened right when Maou and his friends first came to Japan, and it was something of a miracle that he managed to score that phone new just before Joose’d got phased out—not that it was a miracle particularly worth celebrating.

Now, that miraculous stroke of luck was in pieces in his hands, torn apart during his so-called military expedition into Ente Isla earlier. He’d gone over on a mission to rescue Ashiya, Alas Ramus, and Emi, all being held in Ente Isla by assorted nefarious people. In the midst of it, he’d dropped the phone into water, exposed it to a volatile explosion, and sent it flying through the air following a traffic accident of sorts; it was also in his pocket the whole time during his climactic battle against the angels.

The left side of the screen was now completely dark. The caps for the number keys were long gone, revealing the phone's motherboard below, and the hinge that flipped the screen up and down was crushed, exposing open wiring and making the phone not so flippable any longer. Maou claimed he could still charge and make phone calls with it, but even daring to plug a half-ruined piece of electronics into an outlet like that could have led to explosions, electrocutions, horrifying death, or all of that combined.

Emi was later "invoiced" for expenses incurred during her rescue, and the first thing on the list was that something had to be done about that phone. The Hero was no longer capable of slaying the Devil King without a second thought, and if Maou went and fried his brain because he was using a ticking hand grenade of a broken cell phone, that would now be a problem. Satan, the Devil King, continuing to use that phone and later dying in an apartment fire from it—while it'd barely get mentioned in the news these days—would mean everything to her.

"B-by the way..."

Maou's invoice was worryingly high to Emi, but she accepted it with only a few complaints. Ever since, he had been acting weirdly awkward around her. Maybe he was so surprised that his high-pressure approach won Emi over, he didn't know what to do with himself.

Emi hefted a deep sigh. "What?"

"L-lemme just tell you, I'm gonna buy what I want."

"Go ahead. Why don't you?"

"Y-you sure about that? 'Cause you're not gonna stop me, even if you try. You made a promise. We wrote it all out on the invoice—"

"I *know* all that," she flatly responded. "Just buy whatever you want. I don't even care if you go with some fancy new smartphone. Just don't try to repair that thing, all right?"

"Y-yeah...um..."

As if to further agitate her, Maou turned to the nearby shelf, fished out a pamphlet outlining all of AE's new models, and began very deliberately reading

through it.

“...Mommy?”

Alas Ramus, still in Emi’s arms, looked up at her as she continued to stare at Maou. “Mommy,” she quizzically asked, “are you kinda happy?”

“Hmm? I don’t know,” Emi replied, not moving her head. She could see the sweat on Maou’s forehead, despite the air-conditioned store.

“Hey.”

“Hnh?!”

He half-jumped up out of his seat. It wasn’t the kind of act she wanted him repeating in public again, if she could help it, so before he could say anything else, Emi pointed something out to him.

“You sure you shouldn’t be stopping her?”

“Huh? Stopping what?”

“Acieth.”

“Nnh?!”

Maou stood up, eyes wide open. Emi’s finger was pointed at Acieth Alla, Alas Ramus’s “sister” and a woman currently pelting the AE shop salesman with questions.

“Hey, Acieth!”

In a panic, Maou hurried over to Acieth, whose eyes sparkled as she looked at a showcase with the latest models—all at eye-popping prices.

“Ooh, Maou! Hey, hey, which one looks like the best to you?”

“Which *what*?”

“Which phone! You said, Maou, you will buy me the phone, too!”

“I never said that! Um, I’m sorry, you can just ignore her, okay?”

Apologizing to the salesman, Maou attempted to pull Acieth back to the sofa.

“You did say it! You did! When, when we see Albert in Ente Isla!”

She was talking about something that had happened during their journey in Ente Isla. She was the personification of a Sephirah herself, just like Alas Ramus, and much like how Alas Ramus was “paired” with Emi, Acieth was now one with Maou. While Emi and Alas Ramus had been imprisoned in their homeland, she had stepped up with Maou to save them—and just as Emi was reunited with her father, Nord, a man she thought dead, Acieth was able to see her “older sister” Alas Ramus once more.

Right now, though, Maou was ruining her presence. He knew she’d cause nothing but trouble.

“I didn’t say anything about buying you one! I just said that *if* I ever do, I’m getting you one for children!”

“Objection! I have the objection to that! What you say, it is the same thing as you saying ‘I will buy it!’”

“Overruled!!”

Brushing away Acieth’s ranting, Maou sat her down next to Emi, glaring at her to make sure she didn’t give him any more back talk. As if on cue, Alas Ramus reached out from Emi’s arms and placed her palm against Acieth’s forehead.

“Asseth, don’t be selfish!”

“I am not selfish, big sis! I think *you* want the cell phone, too, no?”

“Sell phone?”

Emi shifted positions, looking a bit distressed as she tried to pull Alas Ramus away. “Would you stop giving Alas Ramus weird ideas, please...?”

“Oh, it’s A-OK! I am not asking you to pay, Emi! All I want, it is to make Maou keep his promises...”

“It’s questionable whether we have a promise in the first place! Please, just sit down and be quiet! I took you out ‘cause you said you wouldn’t cause any trouble!”

“She certainly is a handful to you, huh...?”

“Hey! Maou! Your words, they are hurting my reputation with Emi!”

“You’re the one that’s hurting it!”

Maou slumped into the sofa, dejected. He really didn’t want to take Acieth on his own—he didn’t need much imagination to picture Acieth causing a commotion. But the way that Emi and Alas Ramus could only remain a certain distance away from each other also applied to him and Acieth, it seemed. The two distances were about the same, and they were sadly shorter than the trip from Sasazuka to Shinjuku. As a result, whenever Maou visited downtown Tokyo, Acieth was forced to go along with him—but unlike her sister, Acieth had the maturity (and total lack of obedience) of a middle schooler by Japanese standards.

Whenever they went out, the idea of Acieth staying inside Maou and being a good girl was a pipe dream. She’d always go out and start wheedling Maou immediately, and while he was used to it by now, it didn’t make things any less tiring for him. To Emi, meanwhile, Acieth was still tricky to deal with—they had only just met, and Acieth had been living with Emi’s long-lost father, Nord Justina, for what had to be a pretty decent stretch of time. The hang-ups were only on Emi’s side, though, and almost from the start, Acieth had been just as unreserved with her as she was with everyone.

“Mmm...”

Emi looked at the girl as she continued to beg Maou for a phone. It wasn’t envy, exactly. It was just that, well, having someone just as powerful as Alas Ramus around must’ve kept Nord’s life intact on more than one occasion. She hadn’t heard his whole story yet, but Emi knew her father had made multiple attempts to come back into contact with her. And yet, somehow, she still found herself oddly trying to hold back from Acieth.

“Mm? What, Emi?”

Suddenly, Acieth turned toward her, noticing her eyes. Between her large purple eyes, her silver hair with a single shock of violet, and most of all her facial structure, the more Emi looked at her, the more she resembled Alas Ramus.

“Umm...”

Emi, not looking at her for any pressing reason, grasped for a reply, when:

“Customer number fifty-five, please!”

“Oh, hello! ...Hey! Acieth, I’m not buying anything for you today, all right? Sorry, Emi! You mind putting up with this idiot for a little bit?”

“Huh? Ah, wait—”

Maou didn’t bother hearing Emi’s reply before leaving Acieth behind and running up to the counter.

“Who is the ‘idiot’ here, Maou?!” Acieth half-shouted as she stuck her tongue out at him, then quickly turned back toward Emi. “So, what?”

“Huh? I, um...”

“By the way, Emi...”

“H-hmm?”

“You are daughter of your father, yes?”

“...Yes...?”

Where did *that* come from? It put Emi off guard, but Acieth seemed perfectly casual as she continued—and landed a hard blow on Emi, deep inside her heart.

“Well, sorry. Me, I was daughter of him for very long time.”

“...Huh?”

“And I suppose, maybe you don’t like that? Long-lost father, and this overfamiliar woman sticking to him, acting like daughter?”

Her words were bright and indifferent as always, no ulterior motive lurking behind them, but they robbed Emi of her voice.

“But there is this, that I want you to know. Before, when I first have memory of things, Dad... Nord was there, in the front of me. If we call us father and daughter, well, easier to live in Japan together, too. So...”

She flashed Emi a wide smile as she patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

“Nord, he never forget about you, Emi. Not once. So if he call me daughter, you forgive it, okay?”

“Acieth...”

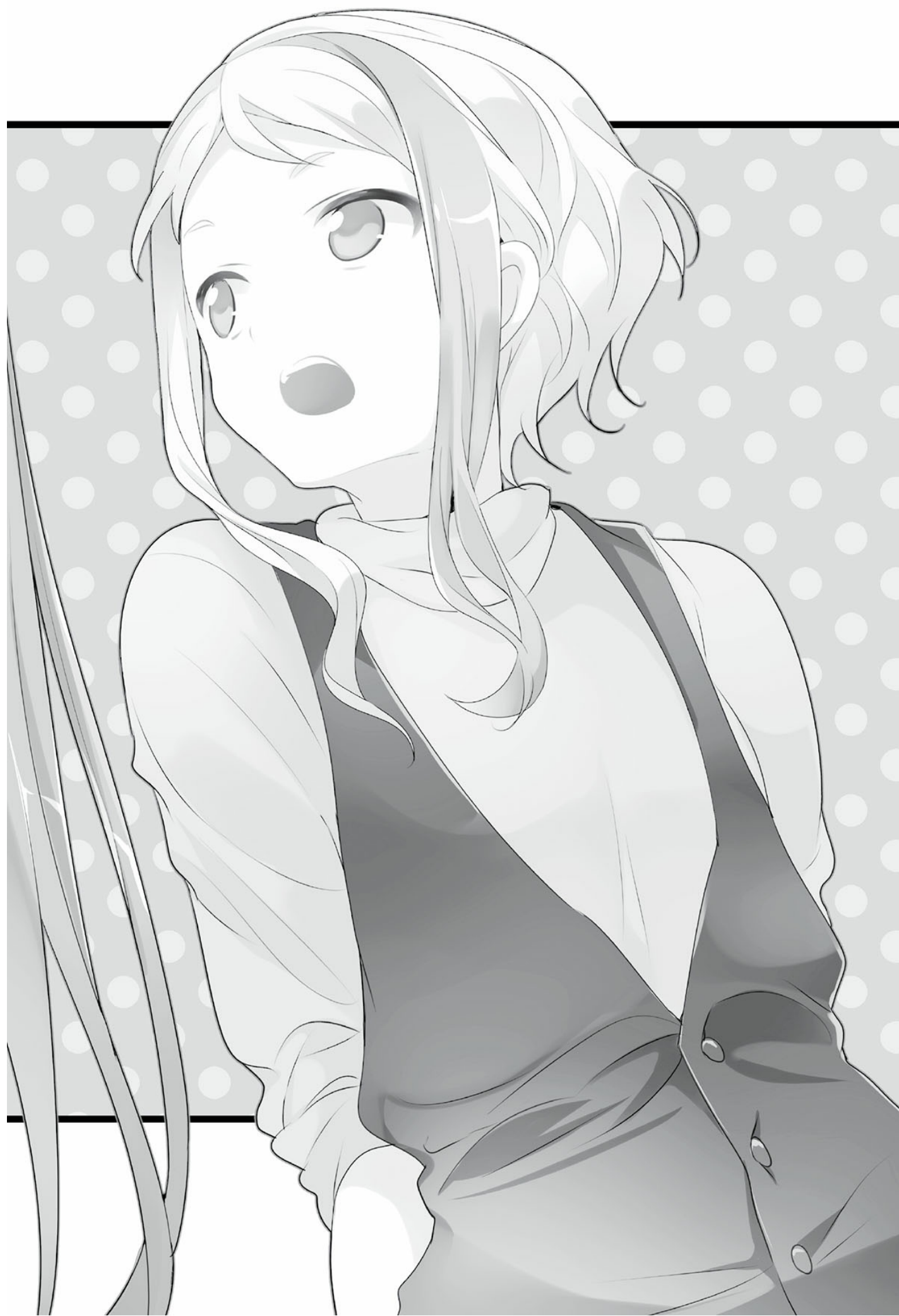
Then Emi realized it. That weird feeling she had whenever she was dealing with Acieth.

“Me, I don’t like the, the being so distant. So don’t worry! Let’s just be friendly. Maou, right from beginning, he was always the friendly man.”

“...Yeah.” Emi nodded. “Acieth, do you...like my father?”

“Uh-huh,” came Acieth’s carefree reply.

“And your sister...Alas Ramus?”



“Ooh?”

“Hmm?”

Alas Ramus looked up at Emi’s sudden name check.

“The Devil King and I... We aren’t connected by blood, but we really care a lot about this child. I’m proud of having her call me Mommy. I’m sure that applies to him, too.”

“Yeah.”

“And in the same way, I’m sure Father’s proud to have you call him ‘Dad,’ too. He’s my father, after all. Regardless of the circumstances, I know you’re just as important to him as I am.”

“Mmm? Are you sure? Is that the...disappointing to you, Emi?”

It was amazing, how Acieth could ask that without any apparent burden to her psyche. You needed such an utterly straightforward, meek, and gloom-free heart to act that way. *That* was the distance Emi felt from her—the worry she had for her. That was it.

“It’d be much more ‘disappointing’ if you kept looking out for me, and it cost you your place in our lives. I guess you’re living in Devil’s Castle right now, Acieth, but there’s someone else living in that apartment, too. Why don’t you go back to him? There’s no way that other room can fit four people in it, anyway.”

“You mean Urushihara... Lucifer? Mmm, that *is* the current problem of me, yes.”

Watching Acieth cross her arms in apparent distress, Emi thought over the past few days. Freshly back from their Ente Isla expedition, Acieth didn’t come near Room 101 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka very much, the apartment where Emi was taking care of Nord. If she was doing that out of concern for Nord’s *real* daughter, it made Emi feel all the worse. Just like how Alas Ramus called her and Maou “Mommy and Daddy,” Acieth felt as strongly about her real dad, Nord—and it was Emi’s own mother who’d brought that about, no doubt.

And before she realized it, the question came all too naturally out of her

mouth:

“Would you both like to live with me?”

“Huh?” Acieth flashed back a look of surprise.

“...I know we’ve all got stuff to deal with, but considering our ‘parents,’ you’re kind of like my little sister. If we’ve both got the same father anyway, don’t you think we might as well just all live together?”

“Ohh...” The offer seemed to move Acieth from the heart. “Such the, the generosity...”

“Y-you think? Thanks...”

“But I think, it is not so doable right now. I cannot go away from Maou.”

“Oh, right.” Emi instantly looked at Maou, who was seated over at the counter. He was still badgering the salesperson there with questions about his pile of scrap. *Why doesn’t he just give up already?* It baffled her.

“You and Maou, you not living together, too. I ask Suzuno, and she says you will not move to Sasazuka, yes?”

“...Yes.”

Emi and Alas Ramus were living in Eifukucho, three rail stops away from Sasazuka and well beyond the range of Maou and Acieth’s bond.

“Then I cannot go to your home, Emi, and also...”

Acieth took another look behind Emi, then focused squarely upon Alas Ramus in her hands before looking back at Emi.

“You think of me as the younger sister, Emi, but our family situation, it is really very complicated, no?”

“...That might be true, yeah.”

Emi grinned, understanding what Acieth was getting at. Her daughter, Alas Ramus, was Acieth’s elder sister. Acieth was *also* Emi’s younger sister, as they were both daughters to Nord, and Acieth’s elder sister was Emi and Maou’s daughter—but, wait, Alas Ramus and Acieth’s real “mother” was Laila, Nord’s wife.

“Just thinking about it makes me dizzy. If this was some other situation, we’d probably be fighting over control of the family for generations to come.”

“Yeah.”

Emi and Acieth both had a laugh at that. The “one hell of a family discussion” Maou promised Emi in the air above Heavensky was something she couldn’t even imagine.

“But, you know, maybe it is the complicated, but...happily for me, and my big sis, everyone... They are important to everyone else. So maybe we do the fighting, but I think it is fine. Maou, too.”

“You...think so?”

In the midst of their talk, Maou had changed roles from the relentless complaining customer to the one being lectured by the clerk instead. Probably related to him continuing to plug that pile of wiring into a charger, no doubt. It made Emi visibly frown.

“Yeah! Maou, he is the liar and very dishonest with the feelings, so hard to understand...” Acieth gave another carefree smile. “But when we ride bikes across Heavensky, he called for you, too, Emi. You are both the enemy to each other before now; that I don’t know. But Maou, he thinks lots about you. I am sure.”

The Emi of the past would’ve denied that appraisal out of hand. Now, however, there wasn’t even a shade of Emilia the Hero left in Emi’s heart.

“Asseth, Daddy isn’t a liar!”

Emilia Justina gave just a tiny amount of attention to the two Yesod sisters’ trivial argument as she digested Acieth’s comment. “...I know,” she said, with some trepidation.

“Mmm? What? That Maou is bad?”

Emi shook her head, her face tensed up. “And I know you meant what you said before, too. But...I’m not in a position to accept that.”

“Hmm?”

Whether she was looking out for her or simply wasn’t interested, Acieth

didn't try to ask what Emi meant by that. Probably a little bit of both, Emi thought. Just then, she noticed Maou standing up from his seat, marking the end of his conversation.

"Guess he will not buy for me, hmm?"

"Maybe not," chuckled Emi. In fact, Maou looked all but defeated as he walked back. A repair was probably not in the offing for him.

"...They said I gotta buy a new one."

"Oh? Then go pick it out."

"Ughh..."

Despite having the freedom to switch to a new phone model with someone else's money, Maou's expression was glum.

"What? Emi, she will buy the new one for you!"

"He must have an attachment to the old one," Emi observed. "He doesn't want to let it go."

"Oh? That is the thought of him?"

"Well, it's the first one he ever bought. He's been through thick and thin with it."

Her guess wasn't wrong. They had spent enough time together by now that she could easily picture what ran through his mind—including all the reluctance at purchasing a new phone.

"Daddy looks sad," a worried Alas Ramus said as she looked at his back, Emi sighing in agreement.

"Oh, Emi?"

Then she stood up and headed for the counter that Maou was seated at a moment ago. "Would you be able," she asked the clerk, "to back up his data, at least?"

"Mmm, it might be hazardous, but since it still connects to a charger, it should be able to read off data as well. It's plugged in right now."

The clerk gave Emi a dubious look, unsure how she was related to Maou.

Maybe, carrying the baby and all, she thought Emi and him were family, at least—but if so, Acieth must've looked pretty weird with them. But that didn't matter to Emi right now.

“His phone's pretty old. I don't think it even accepts any external media—but AE has a service that backs up your texts and photos and phone book and stuff, right? I'll have him sign a data-loss waiver if it doesn't work, so would you be able to try it?”

“...One moment, please.”

The clerk stood up and walked off, looking downright flustered and no doubt seeking a manager for assistance. Really, Emi was being unreasonable—it *would* be dangerous to plug anything into the data port of a phone this damaged. But Emi also knew that this level of “unreasonable” was generally allowed from the customer side. To their owners, phones these days contained features and memories that went far beyond just another gadget. The photos and videos they stored often held much more sentimental importance than anything shot with a “real” camera.

“Emi...?”

She could hear the surprise in his voice, but she didn't turn around. If she did, she feared she'd blurt out something weird again.

Luckily, the clerk returned before Maou could ask any questions.

“Thanks for waiting. We can't guarantee that we can make a complete copy of your data, but we'd be happy to attempt to extract it for you. If that's all right with you...”

“All right. That's fine. Hey, Maou?” she called back.

“Uh, yeah...”

“They said they'll extract the data from this junk for you. If it works out okay, you can carry that data over to your new phone. It probably can't be a smartphone then, but still...”

The advent of smartphones meant that the same phone models were now on offer from multiple carriers, but since Maou's old phone was likely using some

ancient and proprietary OS available nowhere else, its data might not be easily carried over to a modern smartphone. As a result, it was best for him to move over to another feature phone that was (hopefully) compatible with that proprietary software.

“C’mere a sec. They won’t do it unless you sign a waiver in case they lose your data.”

“Oh...”

Maou returned to the counter, beckoned by Emi, and signed the document presented to him. With a light bow, the clerk took his phone to the back room of the store. Maou watched her go, as if bewitched.

“What’s with that face?”

“N-no, um... Why did you...?”

Why, his eyes were telling her, *did you do this without me even prompting you?*

“You put a reflector on your current bicycle in a really weird place, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

She was referring to Dullahan II, Maou’s favorite vehicle. The basket on the front of it had the reflector from the original Dullahan (destroyed by Suzuno a while back) glued to it, but he didn’t think he had ever mentioned that to Emi. Just as he started to ask why she’d brought it up, Emi took the wind from his sails yet again:

“What, you didn’t think I’d carefully examine anything you let Alas Ramus ride on?”

“Uh, n-no...”

She was able to accurately guess at nearly every thought in Maou’s mind—and Emi had yet to realize that this actually didn’t feel all that bad to her.

“Your phone book and past texts,” she continued without picking up Maou’s feelings, “are like the soul of your phone, you know? Having those carried over ought to make you feel a lot better about it. I dealt with a lot of customers like

that, and..." Then she stopped, edging away from Maou a bit, fearing she had talked for too long. "...I don't want you," she continued, her voice deliberately cold, "to be unhappy with this phone I'm buying you and punish me with a higher invoice."

She knew, of course, that Maou would never do that. But she said it anyway—for Maou's sake, and for her own.

"So which one do you want? It's almost naptime for Alas Ramus, so try to hurry up."

"Um, yeah..."

Maou walked back to the showcase, pulled over there by Emi's stern words, and grabbed a showfloor model of the closest silver-shelled phone.

Acieth, watching them carry on, sank into the sofa with a wry smile.

"It seems like such the pain," she stated bluntly, her low whisper indicating she also kind of enjoyed it. "That family discussion, it will be quite the pain in the butt, no?"

**THE HERO IS AMAZED BY THE ENEMY
GENERAL'S VAST POWERS**



THE HERO IS AMAZED BY THE ENEMY GENERAL'S VAST POWERS

It was by sheer coincidence that Suzuno sensed something was off with a sight that had grown all too familiar in recent days. You could say the morning sun just happened to cast its light against it, there in their shared hallway, or perhaps her eyes caught sight of it when she bent over to pick up the key she dropped while locking the door.

“D-Devil King...?”

“Mm? Oh, you’re leaving this early?”

The easygoing reply came from Sadao Maou, the human form of the Lord of All Demons who’d come within a stone’s throw of taking over the world once, but who was now her next-door neighbor.

“...Why’re you all hunched-over like that?”

“N-no reason...”

That wasn’t true. However, even if Suzuno pointed out the cause, what could she do about it? Considering the nature of their relationship, Suzuno had no motivation to actively save Maou from the...*issue* befalling him. They had grown closer lately as neighbors, she had been forcibly named a general in his army the other day, and overall, she couldn’t deny that things were evolving between them in a way they hadn’t before. But if some misfortune were to befall him, her reaction normally would’ve been to point and laugh.

Right now, though, despite that, the sight presented before Suzuno, were she to go through with that, would’ve made her seem so low, so petty. Whether he was her enemy or not—or, really, *because* he was her enemy—his encountering *this* kind of trouble was something she never wanted to see. So, after weighing Maou’s good reputation against her own sense of shame, she opted to point it out. Just not directly.

“D-Devil King, um, what is the matter with Alciel?”

Her plan-B strategy began with asking about Shirou Ashiya—the Great Demon General Alciel, faithful servant of Maou, a domestic god, and truly the ideal househusband in every way.

“Oh, um, he found a temp job he has to stay out overnight for, so he won’t be back until tonight.”

“Wh-what?”

The news filled Suzuno with despair. It also made her understand why the sight before her was being exposed to the public in the first place. There was no way Ashiya, someone keenly aware of his master’s social standing, would allow this to go unnoticed.

“Uh, did you need Ashiya for something?”

“No, umm, that, I was planning to visit the morning market today and I thought I would discuss it with him...but...”

She wasn’t lying. If they happened to come across each other, they would at least exchange pleasantries along those lines. But, in the end, it was both a lie and an escape for her.

“Are, are you going to work, Devil King?”

“Yeah. Just a half-day shift today... Aaaand I’m outta time. See you.”

“Ah...”

With a glance at his watch, Maou turned around without bothering to wait for Suzuno’s response and headed out. He left her still crouched down there as he mounted his Dullahan II city fixie and sped off, the sound fading in the distance.

All she could do was watch as he disappeared.



“Chi, um...do you think you should just tell him?”

“I can’t! I could never do that...!”

Chiho Sasaki—a walking embodiment of high morals, politeness, and good habits, dressed in a MgRonald uniform—might very well have defied her boss’s

will for the first time in her work career just now.

There was nothing at all unusual with Maou's behavior. He was beavering away behind the counter, a refreshing smile on his face. But Mayumi Kiski, manager at the McDonald restaurant in front of Hatagaya Station, and Chiho Sasaki, who knew much more about Maou's life and history than she'd ever be able to reveal to the public, simply *had* to talk about him today.

Would telling the man himself, though, really be an act of kindness? That was where the pair's conversation began.

"No, I think if you told him, that'd keep the damage to a minimum..."

"But I can't, I... I could just never say it. I mean, if I did, you *know* he'll ask how I noticed in the first place..."

"How? Hell, I noticed it from *my* height. There's nothing weird about it."

"B-but Maou's a man, and if he has a girl tell him, I think that'd hurt his feelings. Personally, Ms. Kiski, I think it'd hurt him the least if you phrased it like an order to him..."

"You say that, but for today at least, it's fine. I don't have any right to criticize how he handles himself outside the workplace... Don't you think it'd be nicer if someone with more of a private rapport with him just kind of, you know, gave a hint?"

"N-no, but..."

"Shirking responsibility" was never a term anyone would use to describe Chiho or Kiski. Except today.

The utterly unproductive conversation continued anon. Yes, Chiho knew Maou in his personal life, but bringing up such a delicate issue would make anybody hesitate a little. But then she remembered that in said "private rapport," she had just been placed in a position she knew Maou thought of as terribly important. A position that, by her connection to Maou, gave her a certain amount of responsibility for him.

"It's just so strange, though. You'd think that Ashiya— Oh, um, that's the name of Maou's roommate, but..."

“I know him; he’s come to the restaurant a few times. That tall man he was with a little bit ago, right?”

Chiho recalled the name of Shirou Ashiya, Maou’s closest confidant and general. With someone that careful, that exact with every aspect of home life, how could he let *this* happen? She couldn’t even imagine.

“Right, right. He *had* to have noticed that. Ashiya handles all the laundry and housework, so there’s no way he couldn’t have.”

“Well, you never know, though. Because I really don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that before. It’s not something you’re looking out for unless you know it’s there.”

“Yeah, but if you’re folding it up and putting it back in your dresser, for example, you’ve *got* to notice it then, right?”

“Or maybe it doesn’t show up unless you’re actually wearing it? If it’s just a white blotch like that, maybe you wouldn’t notice it...”

The two of them were discussing Maou’s wardrobe. He was wearing the standard MgRonald red polo shirt, like always, matched with flat-front black pants that gave him a slim silhouette, a red visor, and a pair of cheap black leather shoes. At a glance, the outfit wouldn’t look out of place on any of the thousands of male MgRonald employees in Japan and around the world.

“Well, look, as I said, I can’t say anything to him about his life outside these walls. So please, Chi. I know Marko means a lot to you. Either give it to him straight, or go tell his friend Ashiya, or something. Just figure out a way to keep from hurting his feelings as much as possible, okay?”

“M-Ms. Kisaki! If you put it *that* way...!”

“Because I know I’m your manager, but there’s just some things I can’t do, Chi!”

“Ughhh, I can’t do this... What am I even supposed to say...?”

Kisaki all but fled the scene, a distressed look on her face, as Chiho was almost driven to tears. *Wow*, the carefree Maou thought, noticing this. *That’s rare. Did Chi do something wrong to anger her?*



As the evening sun set beyond the town of Sasazuka, Emi spotted him. She thought about saying something, but before she could take in any breath, the air stopped cold in her throat.

“Pmfggh!”

Then she reflexively blocked the mouth of her daughter, who was about to comment on the same thing.

“...Mommy?”

Alas Ramus, in Emi’s arms, turned a concerned eye to her behavior. Emi had no time to answer her. That *had* to be Maou in front of her, walking his bike along, with Chiho right next to him. Chiho had mentioned that they were both working the day shift today, so their being together wasn’t an issue. She was in street clothes, carrying what looked like an insulated bag—food she’d be bringing along to Devil’s Castle tonight, no doubt.

But what, of all things, could *that* be? She knew that Maou was living life on the barest shoestring of a budget, but didn’t it shame him at all to go around exposing *that* to the world? He tended to at least keep a bare minimum of decent attire on him at all times; that’s how he retained his pride as Devil King.

So maybe he hadn’t noticed? Could be.

Because there wouldn’t be any way to, in *that* location. If it were folded up neatly, even, it’d be impossible to pick up on.

Then, upon reaching that conclusion, a question flashed across Emi’s brain: What was Ashiya doing—the Great Demon General, Maou’s most talented of servants? Didn’t it embarrass him, having his master go around like that? It hardly mattered to Emi how much Maou publicly embarrassed himself, of course. If anything, she should be talking behind his back to the entire world about this—and then, as the Hero who saved a world he had nearly placed on the brink of destruction, she ought to whip out her holy sword and drive it straight into his back.

Now that she was a long-term resident of Japan, however, she had no interest in doing that, and she doubted Maou even suspected she would. But as a human being and a Hero, she had to think that the Devil King losing his social

standing following a gaffe like this was a good thing for her.

She had to, but she didn't. That error he'd made was so small, so piddling, so pathetic, that even Emi couldn't suppress a little pity for him.

"Ch-Chiho!"

Emi walked a little faster toward them. Chiho had to come first. She couldn't afford to scar Chiho just because she happened to be walking with him. Everybody close to either of them knew that she had deep, serious feelings for him. Emi was the Hero, but before that, a living, breathing person. Chiho was her friend. And she couldn't allow her pure, beautiful feelings to be marred because of the Devil King's utter foolishness.

"Oh! Ms. Yusa! And Alas Ramus!"

"Hi, Daddy! Hi, Chi-Sis!"

Emi averted her eyes, unable to look at them directly the way Alas Ramus could.

"Ooh, there you are, Alas Ramus! ...What's *your* deal, Emi?"

But no matter how unnatural Emi knew it made her look, as long as Chiho was walking next to this guy, her pride deserved to be kept safe. She was ready to do what had to be done. And right now, that meant walking right behind Maou until they reached the apartment.

Of course, having the Hero breathing down his neck like this wasn't exactly comfortable for Maou. He knew that Emi wasn't about to jab a dagger into the back of his neck, but there was just something so *awkward* with the position she took.

And yet, Emi kept it going. She didn't want to walk like this, either—but she was willing to sacrifice her body for it. Besides, what if Chiho hadn't noticed, by some crazy chance? She even considered letting Alas Ramus ride on Maou's back as she pushed his bicycle, but not only would that leave part of it unhidden, it'd be even harder to cover his back.

Then she noticed Chiho turned toward her, a sad smile on her face.

"Ms....Yusa?"

“Chiho... You...”

Her expression convinced Emi: Chiho knew the truth. She knew it, and she was still walking next to him. And no wonder. A couple walking single-file down the sidewalk would be too goofy to ignore. The look Chiho flashed Emi also told her that Maou still had no idea.

Anger began to well up from the pit of her stomach. She knew Chiho was important to him, but unless he was capable of covering all the bases himself, there was no point to it. The sheer innocence to Chiho’s act made her heart ache. Falling in love with this thoughtless—disgusting, even—Devil King would never leave her happy in life, but just look at her...

“Almost there...”

“Y-yeah...”

“Uh, what’s up, guys?”

And then here was Maou, completely oblivious in the middle of the two women, but increasingly suspicious at how clearly unnatural their conversation was. Chiho and Emi, meanwhile, just wished he’d notice something *else* unnatural about himself—but the residential area surrounding Villa Rosa Sasazuka was mostly empty at the moment, making his chances of being spotted by strangers low.

“Oh? Is that Suzuno over there?”

Chiho pointed out Suzuno, standing there at the landing of the apartment’s stairwell. She must have noticed them as well, and the moment she saw how Chiho and Emi were positioned around Maou, she visibly gasped. It told Chiho and Emi everything they needed to know.

She was aware, too.

“Hi, Suzu-Sis!”

Only Alas Ramus, her pure smile strong enough to banish all evil from the world, bothered to wave at her.

“Why didn’t you just tell him in the morning...? It’s so gross...!”

“If, if *you* saw something like that without warning, do *you* think you could

offer the right sort of advice with no advance notice, you?”

“N-no, I couldn’t... I mean, there’s really nothing we could do.”

“Wh-what?!”

She had never done it before, but today Suzuno had gone all the way down the stairs to greet the three of them (or, really, just Chiho and Emi). The women immediately went into a huddle, whispering among themselves. Maou, left by himself to stare at them, opted to walk upstairs.

“...Whatever. I’m going in.”

All three women couldn’t help but watch his rear as he climbed the stairwell. The moment he disappeared behind his front door, they began whispering again.

“What could Alciel possibly be thinking? You’d *think* he would notice something like that!”

“Y-yeah, it’s hard to believe he’d miss it...”

“The Devil King said that he had picked up temporary employment that required an overnight stay again.”

““ ... ””

This tidbit of information made Chiho and Emi bring a hand to their respective foreheads.

“First those rip-off door-to-door salesmen, and now this? Can’t they survive a single day if Alciel isn’t there?!”

“I guess Ashiya’s the real unsung hero of the demon realms, huh...?”

“Well...how did he fare today, Chiho? Did it stand out very much?”

“Me and Ms. Kisaki noticed it just passing by him in the staff room...”

“Yeah, and the moment I saw his rear end out on the street, I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. It’s just so pathetic, I thought I was gonna cry.”

“Th-that obvious? But the man himself has yet to notice?”

“Well, Ms. Kisaki said that the fabric probably only stretches out after he puts

them on and he can't see it..."

"Oh, *that* kinda thing..."

"R-regardless. If he has not noticed, we should just point it out behind him at some point and try not to make it sting. It is the kindest thing to do."

"T-true. Just...give it to him easy, like a warm cup of tea..."

"...Uh, who's gonna do that? I sure don't want to."

"What I'm saying is," Suzuno began, "if someone brings it up just a tad awkwardly, as if they've only just noticed it—"

"Aaaaaaaaagggggghgghghhhhhh!"

A pained, shrill scream echoed across the upstairs floor, making all three of them shiver. They all knew what happened. It had only dawned on them now—something they had forgotten. Someone else close to Maou, a man for whom the word "empathy" meant nothing.

"Hey, uh, sorry, dudes..."

The window to Room 201 opened, revealing the face of a sleepy-eyed Hanzou Urushihara.

"...but d'you mind waiting a little bit? Maou just flipped over the dresser, so it's kinda messy in here."

He pulled his head back inside.

"He said it."

"He must have."

"Urushihara..."

"Ooh?"

Their sighs melted into the night sky. Suzuno, Kisaki, Chiho, and Emi had all noticed instantly. Urushihara must've been asleep in the morning, but he had to be awake by now, and he spotted it just as quickly.

And then he just naturally blurted it out. Right there, where his legs met in the crotch of the jeans he wore to and from work today, were two blatantly

visible holes.



“Not, not, not *there*, of all places...”

Maou, his pants spread out on the floor in front of him, shivered.

“Why would there be holes right *there*?!”

This was a pair of jeans, part of his off-the-clock wear. Once again, right where the legs connected to the crotch, the fabric had gone from blue to nearly white. Upon further inspection, the weaving was wearing out and all but gone. Only the cross-stitching was still around, but put your leg through it, and bare skin was clearly visible.

“And *three* of them?!”

All three pairs of jeans laid on the floor had similar holes.

“You had only three pairs of nonwork pants...?”

As much as Emi knew Maou believed in the credo of “poverty with honor,” this sheer lack of a wardrobe was shocking to see.

“I got three other work pairs!!”

“Were they all right?”

“His work pants didn’t look like that today, no,” Chiho said.

Maou checked them, of course—and no, his work slacks were still in serviceable condition. Even the pair he had over in storage had nothing wrong with it—and that’s what he was wearing now, to deal with this emergency.

He gave another look at his ruined jeans, the pain written across his face, then spoke with a voice like the apocalypse.

“So, uh, Chi?”

“Y-yes?”

“Um, if you noticed it, Chi, does that mean...?”

Too pure-hearted to lie to Maou, Chiho finally confessed, as much as it made her blood curdle.

“Ms. Kisasi was worried about you, too...”

“Daaaaaaaagagggggggghhhhhhh!!”

Maou grabbed his head and fell into a ball on the floor.

“You don’t have to exaggerate, dude,” Urushihara casually muttered next to him.

“Shut up, you dumbass!” the wounded Maou snapped back. “I’m not like you! I actually go outside! Your clothes personify everything you are, out there! You *want* people to think that you don’t have any problem wearing jeans with holes in the crotch?!”

“I haven’t really paid attention to what people thought about me so far in life, yo.”

“M-Maou, it’s all right!” Chiho interjected. “We all know this is just an accident!”

“As an Ente Islan, though, seeing the Devil King, who attempted to conquer us so serviceably, walking around with holes in his pants is hilarious. I hope this is added to history books all over the world.”

“Gaaaahhhhh!! Damn it! *Emi* seeing me is something I’ll never make up for in my whole life!!”

“Another new page in our holy scripture...”

“Suzunoooooooo!! Whether you’re joking or not, *stop* it! I’m seriously depressed right now, all right?!”

“Maou...I’m so sorry. If only me or Ms. Kisasi had been brave enough to say it...”

“It’s not your fault, Chiho. If anything, Alciel’s the one to blame for not noticing any of this, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Urushihara replied to Emi. “Like, that’s the biggest surprise to me. The first time I saw it, I was like, *whoa*, was there a moth infestation or something?”

While they had the women wait outside, Maou and Urushihara conducted a snap inspection of the entire rest of their wardrobe. Some of it was a bit worn,

of course, but only Maou's jeans had chosen to fall apart in such a whimsical fashion.

"But if this is all your stuff," Chiho asked, "these pants can't be *that* old, can they? Why are only the jeans like this?"

Maou nodded, his face gaunt. It hadn't even been two years since he and Ashiya made it to Japan. No matter how long ago it was when they bought these clothes, none of it could've been more than two years old. Some of it was used, of course, but the jeans? As Maou recalled, he had bought two pairs at the UniClo in Sasazuka and the other on sale at a clothing store down at the shopping arcade.

"The reason doesn't matter... Look, if you guys're eating, go ahead without me. The UniClo's still open right now. I gotta go get some new pants."

He rose to his feet like a wandering ghoul, grabbing his wallet and walking toward the door.

"Shouldn't you ask Ashiya first, Maou?" Urushihara asked from behind, no doubt just as casually as when he'd pointed out the holes. The three girls had thought the same thing, but they felt so bad for Maou that they just couldn't bring it up.

Maou turned around, his eyes sunken. "This is an emergency," he said in a low voice. "Ashiya's not enough of a monster to whine about one or two pairs of jeans."

"But wouldn't Ashiya say, like, 'even in rags, a man's heart is as pure as gold' or something?"

"You think a modern Japanese person can have a heart of gold if half his crotch is visible?!"

With that, he slammed the door behind him.

"Ah! Maou!"

Chiho, unable to stay silent, ran out after him, pursuing the stricken demon. The remaining three saw her go, then sat in silence for a moment. It was Suzuno who spoke first, as she folded up Maou's ruined jeans.

“Still...I wonder why they frayed like this.”

“It wouldn’t happen to you in those kimono you wear. I think I better check on my clothes, too. I never looked right in that spot, but if I find anything like this, I’m gonna be more hurt than the Devil King.”

“Dude, I never knew Maou was delicate enough to get all hurt over something like this.”

“Hmph. Well, if the Devil King were to continue wearing crotchless jeans, it would hurt all of *us* far more greatly.”

“Where did Daddy ’n’ Chi-Sis go?”

Alas Ramus was curiously staring at the door.

“Mmm... They went out to buy some clothes.”

“What about dinnew?”

“Well...”

Emi and Suzuno exchanged glances. The child wouldn’t understand the truth, and if she did, Maou probably wouldn’t be able to show his face around her.

“We’re all going to eat together,” Emi said in a soothing voice, “so just wait a little bit longer, okay?”

With Chiho out the door, it’d be rude to eat the stuff in her bag without asking. It’d be terribly mean to Maou, besides.

“Okeh!”

“Whuhhh?”

Alas Ramus was agreeable to it. The other child in the room wasn’t.

“Dude, Maou said we could eat without him.”

“Ugh...”

“Lucifer...how could you...?”

Emi and Suzuno glared at him, looks of clear, unfettered scorn on their faces.

“So after the main support of this place has *that* happen to him, you don’t feel any sympathy at all?”

“Look at how kind Alas Ramus is at times like these. Have you no shame whatsoever?”

“Whoa! Why’re you all taking Maou’s side here?” the surprised Urushihara asked. “That’s kind of freaky, in a way. Why do you care if Maou has something really embarrassing happen to him?”

““Not *this* embarrassing!”” they both shouted back. To the denizens of a world laid siege to by a Devil King now half-driven to tears because of holes in his jeans, this was simply too much to bear.



“Maou, um, don’t let this get you down too much... This was our fault, too. We saw it, but we didn’t know how to put it to you, so...um...”

“...No, I’m sorry, too. I freaked out a little too much.”

On their way to the UniClo by Sasazuka Station, Chiho tried her best to cheer up Maou, even as he lurched forward with his shoulders halfway to the ground.

“Like, yeah, if I was a girl, I dunno how I’d put it to a man, either. I’d be racking my brains up and down tryin’ to figure out what to do. And there weren’t any men on shift today apart from me.”

Certainly, there were measures he could’ve taken if he’d known. Walking home in his work pants, for example. But hindsight was always 20/20 that way—and out of consideration for a man who had already gone all the way to work in holey jeans, they couldn’t quite tell him. That was their story, and Maou knew they weren’t lying.

“...Ah, well. Yeah, those holes suck for me, but it’s not like I was exposing my bare ass or people saw my undies or anything. A new pair of pants, and it’s all good. You mind helping me pick something?”

It seemed more than a little bit like hollow bravado to Chiho, but as long as Maou was trying to cheer up about it, there was no need for her to bring up the holes again.

They were at Sasazuka Station in a flash. All the stores at the instation mall were still open, luckily, and the UniClo among them was fairly busy with nine-to-fivers and students on their way home.

“My budget’s...maybe five thousand yen,” Maou said with a groan as he entered the store. Considering he was replacing three pairs of jeans, this sounded horribly unrealistic to Chiho. “Hey,” he reasoned, “summer’s over and they’ll have the fall and winter stuff out, so maybe it’ll be cheaper.”

“Yeah, true.”

The UniClo at Sasazuka Station was on the small side, compared to the rest of the chain’s locations, so the merchandise changed in and out rapidly with the seasons. With summer coming to an end, Maou figured the remaining summer gear would either be piled up in clearance bins or subject to “buy one, get X” sales.

“Do jeans ever go for that cheap, though?”

“It doesn’t have to be jeans for now. As long as there’s cheap pants with no crazy design on them, anything’s fine.”

This convinced Chiho well enough as they stepped inside.

“Oh, look!”

It wasn’t a very large store, so it didn’t take long for Chiho to point out a set of shelves groaning with summer gear—T-shirts for 590 yen, short-sleeve button-downs for 790 yen each. A lot of stuff that was low-priced, but might just be worth it cost performance-wise if you were willing to store it in the closet for a year. Another section of the corner also had a selection of thin, lightweight pants, apparently good for their moisture-wicking, quick-drying properties.

Chiho picked up the nearest pair and looked at the price. “Wow, you’re right. This is pretty inexpensive.”

It was a pair of pleated chino pants, and they were marked down to 1,500 yen—almost *too* cheap, you could say.

“But...this is too thin, isn’t it? It’s meant for summer.”

“Beats bein’ naked, doesn’t it?”

“N-no, you’re right, but...I mean...”

Chiho couldn’t help but smile at Maou’s heavily forced logic. Come to think of it, Maou was the kind of person who’d gladly wear the thinnest hoodie she ever

saw while winter wasn't quite over yet, if he had nothing else to wear.

"Lemme see it... Ahh, this won't work. The waist is too big around me."

"What size are you, Maou? I don't really know how men's sizes work."

A tag with "87" marked on it was sewn into the pleated chinos Chiho picked up first—87 centimeters, or about a size 34 in inches.

"The pants I got on right now are a 76," Maou replied, slapping the knee of his work pants. This would be a size 30 in imperial units. "It's got some looseness to it, though, so I could probably freestyle a little size-wise with a belt."

To the Devil King's Army, which put price above all other considerations, clothing and shoes weren't something they bought custom-fit for their bodies. As long as the size was within shooting distance, they adjusted their own bodies to them.

Maou proceeded to take a few pants off the shelf, then put them back...then take a few more off...then put them back again. This cycle repeated itself a few more times.

"...Nothing."

"Nope..."

His face grew sterner. In terms of sheer numbers, there were a ton of summer pants piled up, but—as you'd expect from closeout jobs like these—there was nothing in just the right size, or any very common size for that matter. The smallest one available was 73, and from there they shot straight up to 81, with the rest of them all in the mid-eighties.

"Oh, Maou, this one's a seventy-ni— Actually, let's not go with this one."

"Yeah, that's...you know."

What Chiho had picked up just by looking at the tag was a pair of cargo pants festooned with the flags of the world, like someone had tried to symbolize the United Nations in a pair of pants. It didn't really work.

"Hmm, maybe I could handle an 81 with a belt. Chi, can you find the one from before...and gimme this one, too? I'll go try them on."

“Oh, okay.”

Chiho handed over the other pleated pants, Maou grabbing another pair for himself and asking a salesperson to lead him to the changing room. “Let me know if you need anything, sir,” the employee said as he closed the door behind him.

Standing there, leaning against the wall across from the door, Chiho couldn’t help but chuckle a little. This wasn’t exactly a thrilling trip out, but this *was* kind of turning into a date, wasn’t it?

“Maybe we’ll do this again sometime, except with the places switched...”

Chiho let her mind lazily run wild. She’d go into the changing room, having Maou evaluate whether she looked cute in whatever she picked. Even that seemed like a dream to her. Of course, given Maou’s current fragile emotional state, she couldn’t bask in the moment for too long, and Emi and the others were waiting back at the apartment anyway—but still, she started to wish this moment could last a little longer for her.

“What d’you think of this, Chi?”

“Y-yeah?”

The door suddenly opened. Chiho reddened a bit before turning her face toward the changing room, as if shyly peeking at Maou.

“Uhm...”

She was at a loss. In a word, it looked lame. Those pleats were *not* happening—that much was firm in her mind. He was pairing it with a T-shirt, revealing a decent amount of his fairly lean body, but below that he appeared to be wearing a large kite around his waist, fabric billowing over his hips. The pants he walked in with were thin, but sized for a slim figure, which made these seem like the main sail of an old naval vessel by comparison.

It made her promptly shake her head. “Let’s not go with that. How about the other one?”

“It looks weird, huh?”

“It’s weird, yeah. It doesn’t match your figure, and I don’t think it matches any

of the clothing you have.”

Chiho wasn’t intimately familiar with all of Maou’s wardrobe, but nothing she had seen on him before would work well with these pants.

“All right. Gimme a second.”

With a humble nod, he closed the door again. He didn’t even have it open before he spoke up once more.

“Nah, this ain’t good.”

Chiho could hear ruffling sounds for a moment or two as he returned to his original slacks and stepped back out.

“There’s too much waist. Even with a belt, the front hook sags way down and it looks awful. Eighty-one’s too big for me.”

“Oh. Well, in that case...”

Chiho’s eyes turned toward a different shelf from before, as did Maou’s.

“It’s gotta be that, huh? But, ooh, my budget...”

She understood what he meant. They were both looking at the men’s jeans section, ready for the colder months and well stocked in a variety of colors and sizes. Being meant for fall and winter, however, also meant the prices were set a level higher.

“Thirty-nine hundred and ninety yen,” Maou barely croaked out. “Oof, that price hurts...”

On a five-thousand-yen budget, it would mean he’d walk away with just one pair of pants. This was five thousand yen he had all but squeezed from the proverbial stone. Ashiya was no monster; he wouldn’t demand Maou spend the winter with nothing covering his crotch. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility to buy this pair, then negotiate a second one with him later—but spending the majority of his cash before attempting to reason with him wasn’t a good look to start with.

“So what do you think...?”

“Hmmmm...”

Chiho, sensing the conflict in Maou's mind without having to ask, found it difficult to push him toward any decision. It was a frustrating outcome, for sure.



“Hello, I’m— Er, what are you people doing?”

It was eight in the evening when Ashiya returned, only to find his master gone and Emi, Alas Ramus, Suzuno, and Urushihara in his place—a rather uncommon combination in Devil's Castle. For a moment, he wondered if the Hero and her gang were occupying their domicile, Urushihara having helplessly surrendered to them.

If so, he couldn't be blamed. There were several dishes laid out on the low *kotatsu*, each wrapped in plastic and filled with food waiting to be microwaved and served. Emi and Suzuno were seated around it, eagerly awaiting the moment, and Urushihara was behind them on hands and knees, giving Alas Ramus a horseback ride.

Ashiya put his heavy backpack on the floor and sighed. “Urushihara, what is the meaning of this? Where is His Demonic Highness?”

“Wait, Alciel!” Emi stated. “Before that, I have to ask you something! Where have you *been* all this time? There's been an emergency.”

“Wh-what? An emergency?!” The sudden declaration put Ashiya in a confused frenzy. “I have just returned from an overnight temporary job. It was a lucrative one, referred to me by an acquaintance, so I left my domicile for a single day. Why must I shoulder the blame for whatever happened?”

“Yeah, we knew that,” the fallen angel asked. “Can you at least say what kind of work it was, dude? Where were you?”

Ashiya nodded back. “I hadn't told you, had I? It was a medical trial.”

“A medical... Whoa! Alciel?!” Now Emi was worked into a frenzy. “You mean they fed you new drugs or whatever for research and measured the results? Are you all right?!”

“Oh, you are worried for my health now?”

“Of course not. You didn't *tell* them you're a demon, did you? If their test

results go all out of whack because of that, it's gonna be *your* fault!"

"I have faced no ill effects from utilizing human medication so far."

"That's not what I'm talking about!"

Ashiya just shook his head as he opened his bag and took out a plastic file folder, tossing it at her.

"What's this?"

"The medicine they were testing."

Emi lowered her eyebrows as she looked at the first sheet of paper in the folder.

"...A 'percutaneous anti-inflammatory topical pain reliever'?"

"Yes. A product trial for an externally applied medication. The concept is for a light pain reliever you can apply for aches and pains sustained during domestic work. A sort of liquid cold compress, you could say."

"Ah." Suzuno nodded as she looked at the papers. "For aching shoulders and backs and the like? I have seen these advertised on television."

"Yes," Ashiya explained. "Think of it as a sort of lighter dose of those treatments. It is not meant for intense pain; rather, to soften the kind of light fatigue and aching one might feel on a day-to-day basis."

Most of the product ads Suzuno referenced talked about how strong and instantly effective they were, giving the impression they would be too much for less serious pain. This led to the suggestion of a lighter treatment for lighter issues, and Ashiya had applied to the final clinical trial for it.

"Whoa," Urushihara muttered. "If all I'm doing is rubbing ointment on me, I can do that, I think..."

"No you can't," Ashiya said, cutting him off. "I had to undergo a rigorous examination before they accepted me. You would be right out, Urushihara, and if you will pardon my rudeness, even my liege might have had trouble being accepted."

"Huh? How so?"

“I told you, this is meant to be a light treatment for light pain. It is not targeted for athletes and other people working their bodies hard on a constant, daily basis. It is meant...for *housewives*.”

The emphasis he placed on “housewives” confused Urushihara and Emi a little, but it was enough to convince Suzuno.

“Hmm, yes, I see. So they are taking stronger medication developed for men and attempting to target it at women?”

“Exactly. The testing period is rather tight, so they only accepted people capable of carrying out household chores at an advanced level. I was asked to perform a great variety of tasks. In the kitchen alone, there were five different motions related to handling a knife. In my case, the high scores I received in the infant-care section were the deciding factor for my acceptance.”

““Infant care...?””

Emi’s and Suzuno’s eyes turned toward Alas Ramus. It went without saying that Ashiya was her primary caretaker while staying in Devil’s Castle. Following Chiho’s guidance, and occasionally receiving a helping hand from Suzuno, he was probably second only to Emi in taking care of the child, in terms of knowing how to deal with infants. With all the meals they now ate together, he was well versed in cooking for young children as well.

“In addition to cooking and infant care, I also carried out cleaning, laundry, and most other household tasks that require physical labor. This, for six hours out of the day. To be honest, between cooking and cleaning, with the trial taking place in such a large room and the equipment all so new and shiny, I found it all rather simple. One of the elderly women who made it through the trial complimented me grandly about my work. ‘You don’t seem like a young man at all,’ as she put it.”

There was a sense of pride to Ashiya’s words as he said them. It made Emi and Suzuno feel weary, for the first time in a while.

“Alciel... Don’t you think you should start to question whether you’re a demon at all?”

“Honestly, if you are capable of that much, then as a woman I may find myself

growing envious.”

Urushihara sighed a half-resigned, half-astonished sigh. “You never know what kinda talent’s gonna help you out, huh...?”

“So, is it clear why I was gone now? And I should add that those documents are confidential. Tell anyone about them, and you shall pay dearly.”

Emi and Suzuno felt like laughing. They had a few secrets they wouldn’t mind sharing with the world *well* before this one.

“Now, can I ask why all of you are here? Where is my liege? Emilia, are you attempting to take over Devil’s Castle while His Demonic Highness is away?”

“Why would I want to ‘take over’ a dump like this? I’d rather live in Bell’s apartment.”

Emi pointed at the three pairs of jeans, left abandoned on the floor following the pointless arguing earlier.

“Mm? Those are my liege’s street clothes, are they not? Why are all three of them out on the floor?”

“Can’t you see? Thanks to those jeans, all of us, along with Chiho and Ms. Kisaki, just experienced one of the most awkward days of our lives.”

“What?” Ashiya glared at them all as he took off his shoes and finally stepped away from the front door.

“Hi, All-cell! Welcum back!”

“...Yes. Thank you, Alas Ramus.”

The heartfelt greeting loosened up Ashiya’s face a little. He was never shy about being hostile with Emi and Suzuno, but the simpleminded child was something he was far weaker against.

“Be good on top of that pony of yours for a while longer, all right?”

“Okeh!”

“Ashiya, whaddaya mean ‘that pony’...?”

It was actually not too uncommon for Alas Ramus to play with Urushihara in here. They had a surprisingly good rapport going, actually, not that he was ever

rewarded for it.

Ashiya knelt on the ground and picked up a pair of jeans.

“Mm, what on...?”

The holes were spotted quickly.

“All three of them?”

“Uh-huh,” Emi confirmed. “The Devil King walked around in public in those today.”

“What?” Ashiya’s face soured.

“I didn’t want to say it to his face, and I had no reason to anyway, but it just looked so pathetic to us. My arch-nemesis, running around with holes in his crotch—and now one of you has been assigned to be Alas Ramus’s pony for all time, which just makes me want to squirm, all right? Aren’t you supposed to be his Great Demon General? I know you run a tight budget, but aren’t you ashamed at all, making him wear all this frayed, falling-apart clothing?”

“Mmm...”

“Dude, since when am I Alas Ramus’s personal pony?”

“B-but we bought two of these jeans from UniClo. I bought some for my own as well, at the time, but they are nothing like this...”

“Yeah,” Alas Ramus’s personal pony replied. “It’s just Maou’s.”

Ashiya raised an eyebrow. “So where is my liege, then?”

“Once he found out, he practically started bawling. He ran right off to UniClo to buy a new pair.”

“Mmmm...” He scowled in anguish.

“You have to forgive him for it this time, Alciel. I feel simply awful for the Devil King. Chiho joined him on the journey. I am sure she will forbid him from purchasing anything too extravagant.”

“No, no, I am confident there is no other solution to this, but... Hmm. You. The pony over there.”

“I’m seriously gonna get angry soon, okay, man?”

“Call our liege for me. Tell him that I will mend these jeans, so keep that in mind as he shops for a new pair.”

“Why do I have to— Huh?”

“Hmm?”

“Wha...?”

Just as Urushihara headed for his laptop, he and everyone else in the room picked up on Ashiya’s bizarre declaration.

“You’ll...mend them? That...”

“Yes,” Ashiya matter-of-factly stated. “Holes this large can be mended well enough without standing out.”

The other three stared at him saucer-eyed as he opened a cabinet and took out a cardboard box.

“Wait, is that...?”

Much to Suzuno’s surprise, it was filled with a mishmash of needles and thread, forming a severely disorganized sewing kit. He had mentioned darning the holes in Maou’s socks with this and a burned-out lightbulb once, but having this sewing kit presented to her in real life made Suzuno feel dizzy.

“For the fabric...I could use this, I think.”

He then took out several pieces of blue fabric that were more or less the color of jeans.

“W-wait a sec, Alciel,” Emi pleaded, still not fully recovered. “That’s not the same fabric, is it?”

It was blue, yes, but the texture was a complete mismatch. It wasn’t even denim. Placing it where the holes were would make it stand out in ways unimaginable to anyone in the room.

“What are you talking about? I will apply this to an invisible section of the pants. It is not a problem.”

“Invisible...? I know it’s between the legs, but if the fabric’s different, you’re

gonna notice it.”

“What?” There was a twinge of surprise to Ashiya’s voice as his eyes cycled between Emi and the jeans several times. “You fool. I am not going to simply slap this on top of the holes.”

“Huh?”

Ashiya then turned the jeans inside out and began cutting out a section of fabric from behind a rear pocket.

“Wh-whoa!”

“Using fabric from a non-prominent section of a well-worn item of clothing to mend holes is one of the most basic of techniques. The colors and so forth wear at roughly the same speed across the garment, so it will not look that unnatural when finished. To replace the cutout section, one needs to merely use a piece of fabric of similar thickness, so the clothing does not become too uncomfortable to wear... Hmm. This is the only blue thread I have. I cannot cut out a large portion.”

His big hands were already deftly handling a needle and thread as he adjusted the size of the fabric piece. He didn’t need a threader, which was good, because his kit sure didn’t have one.

“Similar thickness...? That?”

“This cloth? You should know what this is...? Well, perhaps not. It was quite a while ago.”

“Huh?”

“This piece comes from the pants His Demonic Highness tore when achieving his demon form for the first time in Japan. You were there, were you not?”

“What?” Emi shouted. “I-it’s from *that*?!”

“That” was long before Suzuno began living in Japan, just a few days after Emi and Maou had encountered each other there, and even before Chiho knew the truth behind the two. Thanks to a scheme engineered by the then-hostile Urushihara, Maou, Emi, Chiho, and Ashiya were caught in a cave-in along an underground mall in Shinjuku. That marked the first time Maou existed in

demon form on this planet, and the great demon Satan had sizing needs far different from Sadao Maou the human. The results ripped apart his clothes—clothes that, through the unusual generosity of Ashiya, hadn't been bargain-basement castoffs for a change.

“Wait, *that* outfit? The one that made him look a little bit nicer than usual?”

“Yes. And they shall continue to make him look good, in their own way. Ah, Urushihara has been the enemy of our budget since even before he came to live with us.”

“I was kind of your enemy *period* back then,” the fallen angel defiantly stated. Alas Ramus didn't seem to want off of his back, so he trotted over to the computer on all fours to wake it up and launch the SkyPhone app.

“It was good material, so it felt too valuable to simply throw away. I went to the library to see if there was anything I could do with it, and I found something about the traditional art of quilting, so I thought I could keep the remnants for that.”

Quilting was said to be invented when people sewed squares of cotton fabric together for better warmth and strength, back when it wasn't as cheap and widely available as it is currently. Now it was its own fully established handicraft, practiced all across Japan.

“The book said it was a technique long used to keep fabric and clothing well cared for over a long period of time. My own pants were torn up during that incident as well, if you recall. So I practiced it a little, and it worked even better than I expected. Since then, I've been expanding my handicraft skills with socks and the like.”

“Ah...”

Unlike his master, Ashiya's demon form came complete with a tail. That combined with human clothing would result in a rather large hole right on the top of the butt seam, which meant that Ashiya himself had, technically speaking, gone around with holes in *his* pants before Emi once. But that was in the past, and now, before Emi's and Suzuno's astonished eyes, Ashiya was beaver away at the patch he crafted.

“Uh, hey, Maou?” Urushihara tangled with Alas Ramus and his headphone mic at the same time. “Ashiya just got back home, and he’s fixing up your jeans, so he told you to keep that in mind during your— Huh? Yeah, he’s mending them. And it looks like they’ll turn out pretty good, too. Yeah. Later. Hey, gimme those headphones back, Alas Ramus!

“...Okay, so he sounded pretty surprised, but I told him. He said he’s comin’ back home now.”

“Ah. In that case, we had best prepare for dinner.”

Regaining her senses, Suzuno pulled up the hem of her kimono and stood up, returning to Room 202 to heat up a few of the plastic-wrapped dishes. It left Emi with nothing else to do but talk to Ashiya.

“Alciel... Have you ever, like, wondered whether you’re really a demon or not?”

“No,” he immediately replied. “Demons from our world don’t rely on machines, or the charity of other people. They have magic to work with, of course, but regardless, they live by doing everything they can by themselves. One will not survive long in the demon realms otherwise. When I arrived in Japan, I learned whatever I thought we needed by myself—cooking, laundry, cleaning, sewing, the whole of it. There is nothing more complex to the tale than that. Everything I have learned, a regular person could master the basics of after perhaps a week of training.”

“That’s pretty extremely downplaying it,” Emi said, even though she couldn’t deny it. The human world was composed of people paying people for things and services they couldn’t handle themselves—but if everyone went too far and kept asking others for things they *could* do if they tried, that would make society as a whole lose something. Emi could see the logic to that.

“But how did those holes appear in the first place, dude?”

“That is a good point,” Emi admitted.

“Even with your horse sense,” muttered Ashiya as he ran the needle back and forth, “you still fail to understand it? My liege is the only one of us who travels regularly by bicycle.”

““Oh!””

Emi and Urushihara both stumbled upon it at once, exclaiming their surprise in a chorus.

“He commutes to work on one, and he often uses it for other errands as well. At rather high speeds, too, it seems. With all the force he pedals with, I imagine the crotch section rubs against the saddle enough to wear out.”

““Yeah...””

“And you be careful on your own saddle up there, Alas Ramus. Your diaper’s going to come off.”

“Wheh?! Whoa! Ah, Alas Ramus, you didn’t do it *yet*, didja? H-here, get off for a sec...”

“No! Not yet! More!”

“No, uh, dude, if you *didn’t* yet, I’ll let you go around one more time, so just lemme check real quick...”

The urgency was clear in Urushihara’s pleas as he flailed at the little girl above him.

“It’s almost time to eat, Alas Ramus. Time to get off Lucifer the Pony, all right?”

“Emilia! I heard you say that!”

“A pity you fail to be more of a workhorse in *real* life.”

“Stop berating me like that, Ashiya! You didn’t even look at me when you said that!”

“Enough,” Suzuno stated, walking in with a new plate in her hands. “Chiho and the Devil King will return shortly. Will you lend a hoof to me?”

“Hell no!” he shouted back, almost frothing at the mouth. But just as she predicted, they soon heard steps coming up the outside stairs.

“We’re back!”

“Hey, Ashiya, can you really get those fixed?”

Maou looked almost giddy as he strode into the room, dressed to the nines in his new 3,990-yen pair of jeans.

“Wow, Ashiya... You really did it.”

The sight of Ashiya wielding a needle and thread to fix up Maou’s pants genuinely seemed to shock Chiho. Even as she settled down to her seat at the table, her eyes were pinned to the motion of his hands.

“A simple case of monkey see, monkey do. Nothing very skillful about it.”

Ashiya was always modest like that around Chiho, but to Emi—who had been watching from the beginning—patching up a hole in some jeans in the space of twenty minutes seemed pretty damn skillful to her. He took a break to eat with the rest of them, but by the time Chiho left for her own house, he had three fixed-up pairs of jeans, all mended to the point that you’d never know at a glance that there were holes in them.



There was an unwritten rule among this group that sprang up organically over time: *If Chiho is going home late, at least a couple of people have to escort her back.* Thus, Emi and Suzuno had joined her on the sidewalk.

“Something up, Chiho? You don’t look too happy.”

Emi had reason to be worried. Chiho had been silent nearly the whole time, almost never taking her eyes off the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, eyes focused off to the distance. “I just kinda lost my confidence.”

“Huh?”

“There’s this wall I have to climb over, and it’s just a little too tall, and I dunno what to do...”

“...I am very unsure I should ask,” Suzuno gingerly ventured, “but are you referring to Alciel?”

Chiho quickly nodded. “I’m not sure I’ve ever had a day before where it felt like I could never win against someone.”

“...”

Emi and Suzuno had little to cheer her up with. Any girl in love would hope to be her lover's number one by his side, after all.

"I thought I could handle things like cleaning, and laundry, and cooking...but I totally overlooked sewing."

"Well, I mean... Yeah. Maybe."

It was rare these days for people to bother with that kind of thing. Emi was about to say that before she stopped herself; without a mastery of at least the type of household skills that'd let Chiho replace Ashiya, then regardless of any other obligations, if Maou accepted Chiho's love, her inexperience might wind up causing problems in their daily life.

"...I would note," Suzuno ventured, "that Alciel is not on equal footing with the Devil King. He is his subordinate, and—"

"Yeah, and I'm not entirely sure I'm equals with the 'Devil King,' either..." Emi added.

".....Mm."

Chiho's life skills were nowhere near as poor as she thought they were. She was just comparing herself to the wrong person—but pointing that out wouldn't be enough to convince her. When Chiho was like this, there was only one way to cheer her up.

"I could perhaps give you some pointers. Would you be interested?"

The invite from Suzuno made Chiho literally leap at her. "Oh, please teach me! I've only used a needle and thread in home-ec class, and my mom doesn't sew very much, so I don't know who else to turn to!"

"Er... Yes. Yes, that is fine, Chiho, so settle down for a moment. But keep in mind, I would be teaching you from an Ente Islan perspective—or, rather, the eyes of a monk in service to the Church. I am sure my teaching differs from the language and techniques used here, so you will need to engage in some self-study as well."

"Oh, of course!"

"Well, uh, that's good, huh, Chiho? I guess you're pretty talented in a lot of

areas, too, Suzuno.”

“I have had to learn through experience quite often, in my career.”

As a cleric, and one who had to carry out a number of not-so-pleasant missions in her life, Suzuno had a past that often put her in situations involving spy or undercover work. The skills she learned proved quite handy upon her return to civilian life, no doubt. But, seeing this weird competitive drive against Ashiya plant itself in Chiho’s burning heart, Emi couldn’t help but think:

“...A lot of those talents might seem pretty old-fashioned, to Japanese people...”

In modern times, cooking, washing, and cleaning were no longer considered the exclusive domain of women. In the end, however, being able to perform those tasks beat not being able to. It made you seem like a more decent person, and it enriched your own life as well. Emi’s experiences as a child had made her confident enough when it came to general chores, but the brainwashing effect of modern Japanese life admittedly led her to cut quite a few corners these days.

“...Hey, Alas Ramus?” she asked, softly enough not to interrupt Suzuno and the excited Chiho. She couldn’t have the baby appear from thin air in front of Chiho’s mother, so she had been instilled within Emi’s body this whole trip. All that romping around with Urushihara earlier had tired her out well enough.

“Mmh... Yeah, Mommy?”

Emi smiled at the slow, mumbled voice. “Sorry to bother you when you’re tired. Is there anything you wanna eat tomorrow?”

“...Corn soup...mh...”

“Corn soup? All right.” Emi nodded, took out her smartphone, and did a search for how to make corn soup from scratch instead of frozen. All the ingredients were available from whatever convenience or grocery stores she’d pass on the way back.

But seeing Suzuno and Chiho in front of her made her reflect a bit. Chiho wasn’t afraid to make any effort needed for Maou’s sake, and Ashiya was the same. Suzuno followed her faith so that she could help the world at large

around her. And Maou was eternally working hard for his own ambitions, and to keep Ashiya and Urushihara fed.

“I’m glad you’re here, Alas Ramus.”

If Emi had anything she could strive for the sake of, it could only be her daughter within her. There—after all those years of pushing forward for the sake of what she’d lost—she now decided to work toward someone she could care for in her current life.

**THE
DEVIL
LEARNS
ABOUT
HIS
BOSS'S
PAST**



THE DEVIL LEARNS ABOUT HIS BOSS'S PAST

The five-day weather forecast's expected highs were starting to form a downward line on the TV news, but the buzz of an air conditioner was still a welcome sound for most people in the city. The same applied to Maou as he headed for his post at the MgRonald by Hatagaya Station, where he found Kisaki at the counter, scowling at a small notebook.

"Good morning, Ms. Kisaki. Is something up?"

"Mm? Oh, hey, Marko. Yeah, kind of..."

She looked at him just long enough to say hello, then focused right back on her book. Taking a peek from the side, he saw it consisted of a sheaf of handwritten receipts.

"Why're you looking at old receipts?"

"Oh, no major reason, but...have you seen Sarue around here lately, Marko?"

"Huh?"

Maou opened his eyes wide at the question. Mitsuki Sarue, manager at the competing Sentucky Fried Chicken across the street from MgRonald, was not actually from Japan—or Earth for that matter. He was the archangel Sariel back in the heavens that loomed above Ente Isla, and once upon a time, he had been out to capture both Maou and the Hero Emilia—Emi Yusa—back when she was still more openly hostile around him. After the intense battle that resulted and assorted subsequent events, Sariel one-sidedly fell in love with Mayumi Kisaki, manager at the MgRonald, and promptly lost all desire to carry out his heavenly duties. That was in his past now, and presently his days were occupied by (repeated, fairly off-kilter) attempts to win over Kisaki's heart.

"Mr. Sarue, the manager? No, I haven't, actually."

Maou normally just called him "Sariel," but with Kisaki unaware of any of their

shared past, he had to treat him as simply a rival business employee from down the street. As far as he could remember, Mitsuki Sarue hadn't paid a visit to the restaurant lately.

"Ah. I thought maybe he was showing up when I was off duty, but I guess not. He always leaves a handwritten receipt for me when I'm gone, doesn't he?"

Aha. So that was why Kisaki was thumbing through her old receipts.

Sarue's approach toward her, if one was aware of the outright violent methods he used against Emi and Chiho, was a little hard to believe—but it wasn't anything illegal. Not that anything was fair game as long as he didn't break the law, but if you were *really* lenient with him, you would *just barely* be able to laugh off his behavior as a bunch of silliness. His activities were limited only to when both places were open, and he never attempted to pry into Kisaki's private life.

No, his attempts at wooing her generally involved bringing huge, oversized gifts, serenading her loudly with enigmatic poems of his own creation, ordering vast amounts of food to go, and usually spending no longer than around half an hour there, start to finish. This would happen three times a day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—but, heck, as long as he wasn't bothering other customers, he was just kind of an eccentric regular, nothing else.

He *had* been banned from the premises once, following an assortment of misunderstandings, but no longer. He was reinstated now, and these days it was common to see him make his boisterous entrance, order a much saner amount of fast food than before, and head right out in a regular cycle.

"It's odd, though, Ms. Kisaki. Seeing you, um, wonder about Mr. Sarue like this..."

"Why wouldn't I? Don't you?"

"Huh? Um...?"

Maou had no idea how to answer. Sarue's hyperaggressive love for Kisaki was public knowledge to the woman herself, along with all of MgRonald's employees and regulars, as well as most people staffing the neighboring shops and restaurants. Was there some ever-so-slight twinging in Kisaki's heart after

all, now that he hadn't visited lately? No. There couldn't be.

"After all that passion, he just disappears. It makes me worry that he's devoting his energy to some other target. You can tell he likes flirting with women a lot, y'know?"

"Yeah, um, probably...but why 'worry,' as you put it?"

"Well, not to put myself up on a pedestal or anything, but it takes a woman like me to dodge that crazy full-court press of his, I think. What if he's pulling that nonsense with some other woman he sees? If he picks the wrong gal, he'll have the cops called on the very first try."

Maou blinked helplessly as his deadly serious manager gazed at him.

"You and I know what he's like, but he's still part of this shopping area. If one of us commits a crime, that'll be terrible PR for the entire shopping arcade."

"Ah... So *that's* why you're worried..."

Now it made sense. For a moment, Maou had fretted that Sarue's approach was actually starting to make something come to life in Kisaki's heart—but she was concerned about a far more likely catastrophe.

"But he's really stopped showing up, huh?" Kisaki sighed and placed the book of receipts on a shelf below the counter. "Maybe I should stop by for an info-gathering session of my own. Then I can chat up the employees. If he's been keeping a weird work schedule, I can bring it up with the local business association..."

"I, um, I think you're kind of jumping to conclusions there!"

In Kisaki's mind, Sarue was already either a felon or about to become one.

"I mean, maybe they're busy over there with trying to boost sales for the month or whatever. I think Mr. Sarue's pretty aware of how we do business in here, so perhaps he's just devoting himself more to his job?"

Maou had to ask himself why he was defending his enemy so passionately. But it beat things going awry and Sariel being forced to do something truly desperate.

"Hmm... Maybe so." Kisaki nodded, appeased. "Well, if something comes up,

we'll think about it. For now, I'll just make sure everyone on staff knows the number of the local police department."

There would be no overturning Kisasi's view of Sarue as a troublemaker. Not today, anyway.

"Oh! And one more thing, Marko."

"Yes?"

"Don't get the wrong idea here—I'm not waiting with bated breath for him to come back. He's a great customer in terms of sales, but sometimes a location's got to look at more than money when it evaluates its business."

"I can see that."

When it came to Kisasi, at least, nothing about Sarue's approach would ever move her heart. Besides, it was extremely rare for her to express any personal feelings at all toward the people around her, good or bad. She was human, of course; she had placed some people ahead of others, but Maou had never seen her talk about someone outside of a work context...

"Well, not so fast."

Actually, she had...once. It was about someone who Maou didn't know, someone Kisasi called her "eternal nemesis." For just a moment, the competitive drive she displayed while discussing her was ferocious. What's more, this other woman was working for none other than Sentucky Fried Chicken. That was likely much of the reason why Sentucky's opening across the street peeved her so much, and why she was always competing against Sentucky in her mind, in sales and otherwise.

What kind of person was this "eternal nemesis"? Whoever she was, the woman was originally assigned to manage the Hatagaya Sentucky, but apparently things hadn't worked out that way.

"Huh?"

But then Maou noticed something funny about it all. How had Kisasi *known* that her "nemesis" was slated to run the Sentucky nearby? Even if they were part of the same shopping center, nobody from Sentucky had stopped by to say

hello before they opened for business, and a MgRonald employee like Kisaki knowing about HR moves inside Sentucky would just be weird.

“Um, Ms. Kisaki?”

“Oh? What’s up, Chi?”

Chiho, wiping down tables in the dining space, chose that moment to step up to the registers, looking a tad distressed.

“We have a customer, um... It’s Mr. Sarue from across the street.”

Kisaki instantly grinned at Maou. “Well, speak of the devil!”

“Yeah...”

“So what’s wrong with that? Just lead him to the counter.”

“Um, yes, but there’s a customer accompanying him today, and...”

She paused, still distressed, then motioned toward the entrance.

“She told me to bring the manager, Mayumi Kisaki, over to her...”

““Huh?””

Kisaki and Maou both furrowed their brows. Something about how the message was worded seemed foreboding. Besides, if Sarue was in the restaurant, there was no way it should be *this* quiet. Every day, he had a new declaration of his love to unfurl upon Kisaki, in tones bellowing enough that the other regulars at the Hatagaya location had taken to calling him the One-Man Flash Mob.

“Who’s with Sarue?” the doubtful Kisaki asked. If she was being called by name, it was her job to step up. Maou found himself following behind as she left her spot at the registers, with Chiho leading the procession.

It was definitely Sarii there—Mitsuki Sarue, Sentucky manager, right at the front door. But he looked oddly stiff as he stood there, not at all like normal. No, all the energy in the room belonged to the small woman accompanying him, her face too blocked out by the external glare for Maou to make out.

“...Hmm?”

But then, much to his surprise, Kisaki suddenly stopped walking.

“M-Ms. Kisaki?” Maou yelped.

Not only stopped, but began to practically exude an aura of furious rage around her. To Maou, a demon well versed in the art of converting people’s negative feelings into demonic energy, it was a shiver-inducing experience. He had seen Kisaki’s anger manifest itself in assorted ways before now, but this was sheer *hostility*—massive, sharpened, and like nothing else seen before.

It’d be unthinkable to see that from Kisaki normally, but that was exactly what she was unmistakably jabbing at her visitor with. It was hard to imagine this from Kisaki, the woman who once joked that she’d never call the cops on Sarue unless he visited the MgRonald nude. This was a manager who could calmly deal with even the most unreasonable of customers, whenever they made their rare appearances. What’d happened to her?

Chiho, ahead of her, must have picked up on this murderous rage even more keenly than Maou had. He spotted the look of abject horror on her face when she turned around toward Kisaki, no doubt wondering where that sense of doom was coming from.

“...What are *you* here for?”

Maou began to wonder if the earth was going to explode tomorrow. Of all the things to spit out at a paying customer! The unexpected turn of events made him and Chiho freeze on the spot, capable of nothing but watching it all unfold. Sarue’s continued silence made it all the more bizarre—he’d normally be half-dancing his way through the dining space by now, but now he looked so, so small, like a lamb among wolves.

Everyone held their breath for a single instant before the cogs began to whirr.

“That’s cold, isn’t it? How long has it been since we last met?”

The words were not uttered by Kisaki, nor Chiho, nor Sarue, nor Maou (of course).

It was the other “customer.”

“I’m not here for anything. Just saying hello, is all.”

Now Maou could fully see the woman, her voice sharpened to a fine point.

Her shoulder-length hair was tied back, a leather messenger bag draped under her shoulder, and she was dressed in a pantsuit that'd look at home in public and at the workplace. She looked about the same age as Kisaki. To put it in a nice way, her spirit was unyielding, but no matter how sweet and charming her smile seemed to be, there was also a seemingly bottomless ire, and it was aimed right at Kisaki.

“Saying *hello*?”

The bullet-like impact of Kisaki's voice made Maou and Chiho tremble anew.

“Yes, I thought it best to say hello to other firms operating in my region.”

Kisaki's horrid mask of resentment spread deeper across her face. “Your region?”

“Yes! There was a sudden personnel change just before I was to be appointed manager of my own location. Now I'm the regional manager of the western Shibuya area.”

“*You*, a regional manager? If that's a joke, it's not funny.”

“It's not meant to be. I'm not as pigheaded as some people around here, so I've been working my way up the ladder *far* more quickly.”

“.....!!”

“““Eep!””””

The squeaks of terror erupted from Maou, Chiho, and Sarue simultaneously. Kisaki was a beauty, mistakable for a model at a distance—Sarue was far from her only admirer around the neighborhood—but when she twisted that beauty to demonstrate her anger to someone, the force behind the horror that resulted was difficult to put into words.

“You know, Sarue here...”

The mystery woman gave Sarue, next to her, a palpably forceful shove with her bag.

“Oorf!”

It must've hit home. Hard enough for Sarue to make that kind of noise, at

least.

“He just goes on and on and *on* about you. Oh, you’re so talented; oh, you’re so beautiful. Like a parrot with a one-track mind. So I thought I’d pay you a visit for old times’ sake. Started kind of missing the days when we competed with each other, you know? Like, the last time we were in direct competition was during that event in college, wasn’t it?”

“Well, that’s a surprise. That stupid little show has stuck around *this* long in your mind?”

Maou and Chiho were both thinking the same thing: This mystery event these women shared meant nothing to them; they just wanted out of this living hell as soon as possible. Maou now understood what it was like for a human being to be exposed to an onrush of demonic force—being next to Kisaki when she was unable to hide her wrath was enough to make the sweat flow, the breath quicken.

“I should say so. It was a good college memory for me—’cause unlike *you*, I’m not so contrarian all the time that I can’t take a compliment.”

“...!!”

“M-Maou!!”

Chiho, looking ready to bawl, finally sought refuge with her coworker. Unlike him and Sarue, she was just a normal person. Even the Lord of All Demons and an archangel from heaven had a tough time being here; the air was dripping with so much vitriol, it was a wonder a normal high school teen could even remain conscious.

They couldn’t keep talking like this in here. There was bound to be hell to pay for it. So Maou spoke up, in part to drum up his own bravery.

“Excuse me... We’d be getting in the way of other customers right here, so if you could, perhaps we could retire to the staff room...”

Despite the herculean resolve it took, the words he uttered seemed distastefully weak to him. It took the better part of his courage and experience to muster even that. But the mystery woman brushed it away without even looking at him.

“Oh, I’m fine here! I won’t take that much time, and it doesn’t look like you have *that* many customers anyway.”

““Gehh?!””

“Waaahhhh!!”

Maou and Sarue both groaned. Chiho, able to handle it no longer, ran off in tears. This anonymous woman had just said the one thing a person must *never* say in front of Kisaki.

Maybe not “anonymous,” exactly. They could tell by now that she worked for Sentucky and supervised Sarue, but she was just standing there, in the lobby, trying to goad Kisaki as much as possible. The rage was building up atop Kisaki’s shoulders, like a balloon about to explode.

“And come to think of it, a little bird told me that you’ve been implementing a cavalcade of new services here, one after the other? Even though your average customer counts are below ours?”

“Aaaaahhh?!”

“M-Miss Manager! Please, that’s— Ooph!”

Maou, fully aware of Kisaki’s disposition, fell into panic. Even Sarue couldn’t hide his concern any longer—but the woman simply whacked him again. She was on a roll now.

“And despite that, you’ve always got that ‘Help Wanted’ sign out front, don’t you? You’re probably being all choosy with your new hires out of some misguided perfectionism on your part, huh?”

““Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah...””

“Considering the size of your space, your sales don’t seem *baaad* per se, but you’re gonna be a grunt in the trenches your entire career if you keep that up. You sure liked talking about your big dreams back at college, but you know, if you’re willing to allow the corporation to bury you here for good—”

And this must have been exactly what the doomed residents of the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah saw with their last breaths. The light of despair, and the explosive blast.

“Get out!!!”

The screamed order traveled across the entire space, nearly shattering every window, Maou and Sarue having to run away at a low crouch to avoid getting hit by the shrapnel.

The demon/human dinner mixer at Room 201 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka that night (an increasingly common occurrence as of late) was surrounded by a somber pall.

“Egh...nnh...”

“You all right, Chiho?”

“Y-yeah...nnnnnnh...”

Emi did her best to comfort Chiho, face down and tears falling on her knees, as she glared at Maou.

“You’re *sure* you didn’t do anything?”

“More like I *couldn’t* do anything...”

Chiho shook her head, the tears hitting the tatami-mat floor around her.

“It’s not Maou’s fault...but whenever I think about that moment again, I, I just get so scared, and...*wehhhhh*...”

She had been caught up in a battle that took down a high-speed expressway overpass. She had directly pitted her wits against an archangel. Even when kidnapped by a demon, she always kept her dignity and courage intact. But *this* scared her senseless. Maou, watching from the side, was heartbroken for her.

“It must have been so hard, Chiho. You’re crying so much.”

“Chi-Sis, don’t cry! See? Owie all gone!”

“The more I hear,” Suzuno pondered as Alas Ramus tried to assuage Chiho, “the less believable it is. Kisaki, of all people...”

To her and Emi, who knew Kisaki’s personality well enough, the sight of Chiho crying her way into this apartment because of her was nothing short of shocking. Kisaki had lashed out at a customer out of nowhere and even forcibly removed her from the dining hall—that was the gist of it, from the outside.

Then, not hiding any of it, she reported everything she did to her boss, the manager covering the region that included the Hatagaya MgRonald. That manager knew Kisaki too well for it to be believable at first—even Kisaki’s own crew doubted what they’d seen with their own eyes. But she reported it all, and asked the company to punish her as they saw fit.

“I really had no idea what was going on between them,” Maou pleaded.

“She filed that report,” Ashiya asked as he slaved away at the kitchen counter, “and received no punishment for it?”

“About that...”

Maou glumly shook his head.

It amounted to a ten-percent salary cut for one month and a three-day suspension—such was the scandalousness of mouthing off to a competing regional manager like that. It was, to be honest, a pretty hefty price to pay. As Kisaki’s boss put it to Maou over the phone, the home office was willing to let her go with a verbal reprimand, but Kisaki refused to accept it.

“So who *was* she, then? That Sentucky regional manager?”

Maou shook her head again at Suzuno. “I guess she was supposed to be manager at the place across the street if that idiot Sarii hadn’t shown up. But beyond that...”

“Wait a minute,” Emi said. “Why do you guys know about who works at Sentucky?”

“Well, Ms. Kisaki said so first.”

“I don’t mean that...”

“You mean it’s weird that Ms. Kisaki would know about who works at Sentucky? Yeah, that’s what I’d like to know.”

There was too little information to work with. What had possessed Kisaki to do that? Would it be proper to ask her what was up once her suspension expired? As he pondered this, Maou could be sure about only one thing: That Sentucky superboss had to be the “eternal nemesis” Kisaki had mentioned.

“Hey, you think it’s this lady?” Urushihara called out from behind him.

“Huh?”

“This is Sentucky’s employee list. I toldja about it before, remember?”

“Ohh, yeah, you did.”

Back before Sarue’s cover was blown, Urushihara illegally accessed Sentucky’s HR database to point out how baffling a person he was. According to the logs he had uncovered, the manager over at Hatagaya wasn’t Sarue at all, but a woman named...

“Waaaaahhhh!!”

“M-Ms. Sasaki?! Please, get a hold of yourself!”

The moment the photograph appeared on Urushihara’s display, Chiho was stricken with fear all over again, an unfamiliar sight Ashiya struggled to deal with.

“That, that’s her! It’s that woman!” Maou stared at the display. “Himeko Tanaka, huh...?”

The determination in her spirit was visible even in the ID photo. It was definitely the lady Kisaki had almost come to blows with.

“Hey, I just remembered... Didn’t the ‘Mitsuki Sarue’ entry in that database describe someone totally different? Do we know what happened to that guy?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. Umm, hang on...”

Urushihara tapped away at the keys for a while.

“Yeah, he’s still there. Sarel didn’t have him fired or anything. He’s out of the store-management business entirely, but...”

“Oh...”

Maou had no idea who the “Mitsuki Sarue” was whose identity Sarel had taken over, but the archangel potentially doing harm upon that innocent man was a concern for him.

“But if you think about it, we know that Sarel didn’t become a Sentucky manager any normal way. If you got your demonic force back, couldn’t you just appoint yourself manager, too, Maou?”

“Uh, I’m not just looking for money and power, I want to learn the work. It’s not about getting a full-time stint just so I can have a fancy title.”

“You think that excuse is gonna work with me, dude?”

“Hey, c’mon. I always trust the people under me. Why can’t I get that back from you?”

“Cause it’s a waste of time?”

“Urushiharaaaaa!! How dare you treat His Demonic Highness’s feelings like that!”

Urushihara was just being honest, at least, no matter how much it enraged Ashiya.

“What? I’m just saying it’s a waste of time!”

“You good-for-nothing parasite! The *real* waste of time is having my liege spend his valuable money supporting you!”

Letting the two of them continue their fruitless yapping to their heart’s content, Maou sat down by the computer. “Himeko Tanaka... Her history looks pretty normal to me. Y’know, Chi?”

“Y-yeah...”

“Do you know how old Ms. Kisasi is?”

“Huh? I think she mentioned it once... Like, she said she was ten years older than me, maybe?”

“So twenty-six or -seven? That would make Tanaka as old as her. They seemed to know each other pretty well... Maybe something happened between them. Something to make that ‘nemesis’ talk not seem like much of a joke.”

“Nemesis? What kind of talk?”

“Oh, there was this one time when Ms. Kisasi referred to this Tanaka as her ‘eternal nemesis.’ It sounded like she was exaggerating to me, but...”

“Wow... I’m sorry for Ms. Tanaka, but just looking at that ID photo is giving me flashbacks...”

It was strange, seeing Chiho keep her face away from the computer screen

like a vampire shunning the sunlight, but this was no laughing matter for Maou.

“What’re we gonna do if this lady’s at the Sentucky down the street for a while to come, I wonder?”

He’d never managed to get a word in with this Himeko Tanaka before she left. Kisasi was shoving her out of there before he could, Sarue following along with her. He still had no idea why she’d visited in the first place. A regional manager was someone a kitchen employee might almost never see, but when they showed up, they started showing up a *lot*. There was every chance Tanaka might stop in quite a bit while Kisasi was gone.

Maou sighed as he propped his head up with an arm. “If she comes in again, I guess I’ll just have to treat her normally, like nothing happened.”

“That sounds pretty passive of you,” Emi said as she continued to care for Chiho. “You see how scared Chiho is. Why don’t you scout out enemy territory and figure out a more active defense for yourselves?”

“Enemy territory? You mean the Sentucky?”

In the end, Maou pondered the question for quite some time.

The next day, during his lunch break, Maou stood in front of Sentucky. He peered inside through the door, but didn’t see that regional manager anywhere.

“Guess Sarii’s around.”

Steeling his resolve, he opened the door, only to quickly realize something. Despite being a rival in two different ways—a competing fast-food chain, run by an archangel who had it out for him—he had never set foot inside this place before. It had a relaxed, chic atmosphere, maybe a touch more upscale than McGonald’s, and that went a long way toward explaining the higher prices on the à la carte menu.

He had aimed for a slower stint of the afternoon, so it was quickly his turn at the counter—and just as he hoped for, Sarue was manning the register in front of him.

“Hello! How can I...? Oh. *You*.”

The salesman's smile disappeared the moment he recognized Maou, but his eyes were turned down, as if a bit fatigued.

"What do you want? Because I don't have the energy to talk to you right now."

"Because your boss pissed off Ms. Kasaki?"

"Ugh..." Sarue groaned at this unwelcome call out, only to then hedge. "Um... how was Ms. Kasaki afterward?"

"Well, thanks to her violently kicking you guys out, the company's punishing her a couple different ways."

"P-punishing?! Ah, ahhh, what terrible news! And I was there the whole time..."

He began to shake, as if he'd crumple to the floor right there.

"You were there, but you didn't help any of us out at all, did you?"

"I—I don't need you reminding me! As if *you* could've stepped in between Manager Tanaka and Ms. Kasaki back there!"

Remaining totally statue-like instead of attempting to stop an argument between two fast-food employees was a pretty pathetic performance for both of them, frankly. But:

"What, you have trouble dealing with her?"

"I am weak against the beautiful, as a rule."

"I wasn't asking that, dumbass."

Maou banged a fist against the counter, before he realized what he was doing. He didn't know much about Sarue's personal preferences, but if Kasaki was a beauty like ice, or night, or the moon, Himeko Tanaka was more like the sun or the prairie in summertime. Flashier. Whether he wanted to get closer to her was another matter, but she was definitely pretty—pretty enough to earn praise from Sarue, despite his infatuation with Kasaki.

"Well, in so many words...Manager Tanaka is...an old classmate of Ms. Kasaki's."

“Ah, so that’s it. They seemed acquainted.”

He surmised that much from the HR database, not that he was going to tell Sarue about that.

Sarue continued, “I mentioned to her that I’ve spoken with Ms. Kisaki in the past, and she latched on to that in the strangest way. I was hoping to learn more about Ms. Kisaki myself, so we talked about what we knew with each other. Then, out of nowhere, she shows up yesterday and says she’s gonna say hello to her...”

“Mm-hmm?”

He made it sound like Himeko Tanaka wanted to see Kisaki more than anything in her restaurant.

“But didn’t you just tell me that you had trouble dealing with that manager?”

“Like I said, I am weak against beautiful women.”

“Are you being serious with me, or what?”

“I could ask the same of *you*—couldn’t I, Devil King? If you aren’t buying anything, I’ll have to ask you to leave. Just thinking about how your company has punished Ms. Kisaki makes my heart feel ready to burst!”

Maou would have loved to see him explode into tiny pieces right now. He would have to be disappointed.

“Oh, uh, I’ll take three pieces of Original Chicken to go.”

“...All right.”

Anyone with money in hand’s a customer. Sarue silently handled the order from Maou, a flip-flop from how their interactions usually worked.

“So what kind of info did you share with each other?”

“You’re going back to *that*?” Sarue couldn’t have looked more annoyed, but he fielded the question anyway. “It was nothing important. Like, that Manager Tanaka and Ms. Kisaki knew each other for a long time, that I was passionately in love with Ms. Kisaki, that sort of thing.”

“You said that? I have to admit, I gotta respect that.”

“Also about that thing from before.”

“What thing?”

“We ran into Ms. Kisaki outside of the restaurant once, remember? After Chiho’s Idea Link training.”

“...Oh.”

Chiho had trained at one point to learn a holy magic known as Idea Link, so she could make fast contact with Maou and the rest in case of emergency. They had enlisted Sariel’s help for it, and on the way back from the session, they had bumped into Kisaki.

“Wait, did you tell her about Ms. Kisaki’s...?”

“Do I look like that much of a fiend? I’m not thoughtless enough to reveal someone else’s dreams that easily. I *did* phrase it in a way that indicated she might be interested in going independent, though, sometime in the future.”

That still seemed like a lot to reveal, but Maou let it slide. It didn’t venture beyond the range of topics a person might bring up when discussing a mutual acquaintance.

“Here you go.”

Just then, Maou’s chicken order was wrapped up and sent to the register. Sarue carefully placed it in a bag and handed it over.

“And either way, Manager Tanaka isn’t going to come around again for a while. You don’t need to worry yourself sick about anything. But when I think about Ms. Kisaki at home right now, all gloomy over what happened at work... Ahhhh!”

“Thanks.”

Maou, certain that continuing this talk would just set Sarue out of control and annoy his coworkers, took his cue to leave. He *had* gotten some info out of him, at least.

“H-how was it?” Chiho asked when he came back.

Maou just glumly shook his head. “Useful, but not too useful, I guess.”

He went over the basics with her: Himeko Tanaka was an old acquaintance of Kisaki's, she still had an interest in her, and Sarue had been keeping her abreast of Kisaki-related happenings. None of it adequately explained Kisaki's outburst.

"Well, just because you've known someone for a while doesn't mean you like them. Kind of like frenemies, maybe, or people doomed to fight with each other."

"Frenemies...?"

That evaluation sounded right to Maou. But Chiho saw the term another way.

"Why're you laughing, Chi?"

"Oh, that just reminded me of a couple people in my life."

"Mm?"

"Ah, nothing. So what's Ms. Tanaka doing now?"

"Well, according to that idiot Sarii, we won't be seeing her again for a while."

"Really?" Chiho breathed a visible sigh of relief. "Because if she comes back once Ms. Kisaki is back on duty, I'm not sure I'm going to survive."

"Yeah, if she's able to confront Ms. Kisaki when she's fully raging like that, I don't think anyone could beat that manager."

It was the honest truth, straight from the Lord of All Demons' heart.

But in the end, they didn't have to wait long for another outbreak.



"Goddammit, Sarii..."

"Huh? What was that?"

"N-nothing..."

Maou instantly swore in his mind to take revenge against the archangel when Himeko Tanaka, the manager Sarii swore wouldn't be around again, had marched right into McGonald that same evening. Chiho, and the rest of the crew familiar with her, swallowed nervously as they watched Maou engage her.

"Let's see...I'll have a teriyaki burger combo with fries and orange juice. Also,

one regular hamburger by itself. Regular-size juice, no ice.”

She didn’t look much different from before as she strode up to the register, lassoing Maou before he could run off in a panic and ordering like a regular customer for a change.

“All right. That’ll be six hundred and fifty yen, please.”

“Here. Sorry for all the change.”

She tossed a small collection of coins on the change tray. Maou mentally counted them up.

“Er, I apologize, but this coin here...”

There were four 100-yen coins, four fifty-yen coins...and then, among the five copper coins on the tray, there was one that didn’t look like the standard ten-yen piece at all.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Tanaka chirped, not sounding at all apologetic as she replaced it with another coin. “I must’ve forgotten to take this out of my purse after I got back from England.”

It was a two-pence coin, the same copper color as the ten-yen piece but a completely different size. Mixed in with a bunch of other spare change, it could’ve easily been overlooked.

“...You were traveling there?”

Tanaka gave him a natural nod. “Yeah, sort of.”

In the midst of this, the completed order was sent to the counter on a tray.

“Here you go. Enjoy!”

“Thank you.”

Then she took the tray and sat down by the front window, a bit out of sight from the registers. Maou watched her go from the corner of his eye.

“Wow, Marko.”

Behind him was Takefumi Kawata, a seasoned coworker of Maou’s, better known by Kisaki and the rest of the crew as Kawacchi.

“Me and Chi were freaking out back here, but— Huh?”

He realized that Maou had his right hand out toward him, palm up, from an angle that customers couldn’t see in the dining space. A “stop” signal. Once Maou was sure Kawata got the message, he approached him as casually as possible, then quickly whispered into his ear as he passed by:

“Wait until she leaves.”

And with that, Kawata went back to his own work, as if nothing had happened. Maou gave the same warning to Chiho before doing the same.

After a good hour or so, Himeko Tanaka finally got up, cleaned off her tray at the trash bin, gave a light wave of the hand to Maou, and left. Even when she was no longer visible from the inside, Maou stayed on guard for a while to come—half an hour, in fact, until he finally felt it safe to breathe normally again. Chiho and Kawata immediately ran up to him.

“What was that all about, Maou?”

“I think we were probably being tested.”

“Oh?”

“What do you mean?”

“The teriyaki burger she ordered is easily affected by the condition of the plates. It’s a pain in the ass to assemble, too.”

The “plates” referred to the metal plates on both sides of the clamshell grill used to cook MgRonald burger patties. A teriyaki burger required the cook to put a unique sauce on the patty while cooking, which made it hard to prepare alongside strings of other burgers. Plates in poor condition affected the taste of both the patty and the sauce, easily resulting in an inferior sandwich. What’s more, when assembling the burger, smearing on the patty’s sauce and the mayonnaise incorrectly would guarantee soggy buns and wrappers when served, making for a messy eating experience. Among the burger menu items, it required the most attention to get right.

Alongside that, Tanaka had ordered a regular, plain old burger, which couldn’t be made on the same plates as the teriyaki one. The MgCafé expansion

included a new grill with more plates, allowing them to cook teriyaki and other burgers in parallel—maybe that was her way of deducing this location’s kitchen setup.

“And I wonder why she ordered an orange juice. That, and why she sat where she did.”

The beverages at MgRonald, except for coffee and hot tea, were served out of a dedicated drink server that mixed concentrated syrup with water or carbonated water as needed. However, the syrup for fizzy dinks needed to be handled quite differently from the concentrate for orange juice and cold oolong tea.

“Was she checking to see how the machines were maintained?”

“Yeah. Making a point of going with no ice, too.”

The syrup and carbonated water for sodas and drinks flowed out of tanks kept separate from the server, but orange juice and oolong tea were kept in special bags on their own. What’s more, between the fructose in orange juice and its relative unpopularity compared to sodas, lazy maintenance led to residue buildup in the tubes and dispenser much more quickly than with other drinks.

“That, and she went all the way to the other end of the dining space so she could scope out how clean the place was, I think. I can’t be sure, but...” Maou frowned. “Mr. Sarue told me that his manager, Tanaka, knew Ms. Kiseki from a while back. I don’t know what’s happened between them, but we’re all a part of Ms. Kiseki’s team. I didn’t think we could afford to show any weakness around her.”

“Kawacchi made those burgers, so I think we’re fine there,” Chiho said.

“Yeah, I’m definitely not gonna disappoint ya on that!”

“And I cleaned the dining area after lunch down to the last detail, so that shouldn’t be a problem, either!”

She and Kawata, at least, were supremely confident. Maou nodded broadly. He trusted them on that score.

“Yeah. And I just inspected the drink server yesterday. As long as we’re

around, nobody's gonna write this location up about anything."

Even as he spoke, Maou couldn't wipe away his concerns about Tanaka's behavior. But neither she nor Kisaki were that old, as it went. Maybe they always liked competing with each other, and it just happened that one was now ahead of the other.

"Well, either way," he said as he looked at the shift schedule on the wall, "we'll just have to keep this place safe until Ms. Kisaki comes back."

Around half an hour before closing time, Maou placed a call to the regional manager (McDonald's, that is) and reported that the closing procedure was under way without a hitch. Maou would be locking up the place tonight, and his regional boss would be opening the next morning—a rare event.

So he made his rounds, ensuring most of the procedure was wrapped up. It was eleven thirty in the evening, and while customers weren't uncommon up to ten or so, it was well past that now. The dining area gradually emptied out, marking the end of another day of the McDonald grind...and then the automatic doors sprang open.

"Welcome! ...Um."

He made a point of turning up the enthusiasm for the late-night customers who'd appreciate it the most, but this customer was wholly unexpected—in a non-Tanaka kind of way.

"Huh?" he instinctively said.

"Hey. Nice to see you're still at it."

She was about the same height as Maou, a calm, refined woman with a clean-looking bob cut. Her soft voice and gentle face often made it hard to believe what a hard, diligent worker she was. It was the first time Maou had seen her out of uniform.

"Oh... Is that you, Ms. Mizushima?!"

"Hello! Sorry I'm coming in so late," she said, smiling as she walked to the register.

Yuki Mizushima had been hired full-time at McDonald at the same time Kisaki

was to manage the location inside the Fushima-en theme park. That was in a different region from the west-Shibuya ward Hatagaya was in, but the two locations would frequently share employees to fill holes in their respective shifts. Maou himself had spent more than a few hours over at Fushima-en. This, however, was the first time Mizushima had ever showed up here.

“Um... I apologize, Ms. Mizushima, but Ms. Kisaki isn't in today...”

Judging by her clothing, she wasn't coming back from work. The only reason Maou could think of for her being here was to see Kisaki.

“I know,” she replied, stopping him. “She's on self-suspension today, right?”

“Self...? Well, I mean, it's kind of official from the company, I think, but...”

“Pretty obstinate of her, don't you think? I don't think her bosses had any intention of punishing her.”

“I heard about that. But I know how Ms. Kisaki feels, too. Forcibly removing a customer from the premises, in front of all of us...”

Kisaki always believed in treating all customers equally, a drive she made sure was deeply instilled in her entire crew. That was the golden rule and she broke it, so Maou was sure she probably felt like burying herself in the sand at the moment.

As he thought about that, Mizushima leaned over the counter, a knowing smile on her face. “By the way...”

“Yes?”

“Do you have some time after work, Maou?”

“...Yes?”

That coaxing voice was hard for Maou to deal with.

“How about we get some dinner together, hmm?”

“What?!”

“Um, so, where're we going...?”

“Oh, don't worry. Just follow me.”

Mizushima paid no mind to the timid Maou as she immediately started walking forward, out of the bike lot behind the building. He followed behind, pushing his bicycle, but Mizushima stopped before long.

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah... Huh?”

Maou couldn't be blamed for his surprise. They were stopped in front of a building with a franchise *izakaya* chain inside, in the same shopping center, no more than 150 feet from where they began. She immediately began climbing the stairs to the place, opening the door.

Being a Sunday night, there was plenty of seating available—but instead of saying anything to the staff, Mizushima kept on walking, right into the dining space, an increasingly confused Maou following her.

“Hey!”

When he saw the person seated where Mizushima stopped, Maou almost jumped out of his skin.

“M-Ms. Kisaki...?!”

There, sourly crossing her arms inside the booth, sat Kisaki in street clothes.

“Hey...Marko. Thanks for covering today. Sorry to call you over right after.”

“I watched him close up for you, Kiki. Everything's good.”

“K-Kiki?”

It must've been Kisaki's nickname, judging by things. But having a woman powerful enough to make Devil Kings and archangels bend to her will be called “Kiki” left Maou at a loss for words.

Kisaki must've realized. “Stop calling me that around people, Yuki,” she said, looking even more peeved. “I'm not a kid anymore.”

“You're not being too convincing, Kiki, given how you immediately got worked up the moment you saw Hime in there. You haven't changed at all from the past! Right, Maou?”

“Eee?! Huh?! Ah?! N-no, um, uhh?! Wh-what, whatever do you mean ‘the past’?”

His stuttered, heart-pumping reaction was mainly the result of Mizushima suddenly putting an arm over his shoulder. *What's with her, too? She's a completely different woman out of the workplace!*

"Yuki! Let go of the poor man; you're embarrassing him... Here, why don't you sit down, Marko?"

"Okaaaay!" Mizushima said.

"Um, sure, uh, excuse me...", Maou acquiesced.

Mizushima sat down beside Kisaki, and Maou took an aisle seat. As he looked at Mizushima across from him, as she was peering at the menu, he couldn't help wondering what the hell was about to happen.

"I'll pay for you guys tonight, so have at it! Do you drink, Maou?" she asked.

Legally, and age-wise, Maou was fully cleared to drink alcohol in Japan. But thanks to reflexes honed by the frugal lifestyle he'd "enjoyed" for so long, along with the two women staring him down right now, he just couldn't.

"N-no, um, I gotta get up early tomorrow, so I'll just take oolong tea."

"Pretty sober-minded, huh? Or nervous? Or holding back?"

Maou was beginning to surmise that Mizushima had enjoyed one or two herself before visiting MgRonald.

"If we're talking about Marko, I'd say all of the above."

"Ms. Kisaki..."

He had to object to that, but Kisaki ignored it as she, out of nowhere, turned to Maou and bowed her head.

"I'm sorry. I lost my temper, and I made you go through all of that."

"Oh, um, no..."

"Kiki isn't letting herself drink during her suspension, so don't worry about that. But how about it? You have to be hungry after work. We already ordered a bunch of stuff."

"...Are you drinking, Ms. Mizushima?"

“Well, *I’m* not on suspension,” she brazenly declared as a glass of sweet-potato *shochu* liquor on the rocks was placed on the table. “So. The reason I dragged you in here was because I wanted you to listen to an old story of ours.”

“An old story?” a confused Maou asked.

“About Himeko Tanaka, that girl Sarue brought in.”

“Oh, Mr. Sarue actually told me a little about her. He said you’ve known each other a while?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while, all right...” Mizushima smiled as she played with the ice in her drink. “I mean, since kindergarten, essentially.”

“Huh?”

The bombshell made Maou gasp a little. This wasn’t just the realm of “acquaintances” any longer. This was a lifelong thing. And it led him to another conclusion:

“Wait... You too, Ms. Mizushima?”

“No, I first met her in grade school. We were in kindergarten together, but different classes.”

“That’s not much of a difference!”

Mizushima gave Maou a quiet laugh. “Oh, the bad blood between them’s been legendary since elementary school.”

“Oh...”

“And if you ask our mutual friends, they were even having it out with each other back in kindergarten.”

The “frenemies” tag seemed pretty well set in stone now.

“So why are you still associating with each other?”

“Not associating,” Kisaki grumped. “It’s all Yuki’s fault that I can’t separate myself from her.”

“Oh, that’s not very nice!” Mizushima gave her companion a bop on the upper arm. “But anyway, Kiki and Hime have always been so competitive—to the point of, like, why take it to *that* level, y’know? Plus, they were stuck in the

same class for nine straight years, from first grade 'til the end of middle school. That's another reason."

"W-wow. That's amazing."

Even Maou, who'd never had the pleasure of experiencing the Japanese education system, knew that schools generally shuffled class assignments from year to year. Having a common classmate for the first nine grades of compulsory education took nearly miraculous odds.

"As far as I remember, Kiki's always been good at art and calligraphy and stuff, so she always won a prize for that every year in school. And every time, Hime would turn red in the face. Hime's what I guess her guidance counselor would've called the 'noncreative' type."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, she's got absolutely zero artistic ability whatsoever. Her handwriting was terrible, and if you asked Himeko to draw a dog, a bird, and a fish, you wouldn't be able to tell which one was which."

"That's...impressive..."

"Yeah, and meanwhile, the pictures I'd draw in art class would keep getting picked for showings at the local ward office."

Kisaki seemed at least a bit proud of that—something Mizushima was quick to gleefully shoot down.

"But the thing is, Kiki could never beat her in sports."

"Say what?!"

"Ngh...!"

It was hard to believe, given how little the two of them differed in body structure now, but judging by Kisaki's reaction, it was the truth.

"Kiki wasn't a total disaster in phys ed, but Hime was really good at it. Whenever there was a long-distance race or a fitness test, she'd always place in the top. And meanwhile, Kiki would cry her eyes out every time she lost a race, like 'Ooh, next year I'll get her!'"

“Ugh, that made me so mad! I was bigger and stronger than her, too! But I didn’t lose to her all the time, Marko! I beat her once in the second year of middle school! You know, during a practice marathon run in gym!”

“O-oh...”

That was about the best Maou could do. It was hard to imagine Kisaki crying, even as a child. Maou had no idea how to react to Kisaki expressing honest emotion over something besides daily fast-food sales.

“Yeah,” Mizushima protested, “but Hime was running a fever that day. She was sick, but she was all like ‘I don’t wanna sit out, I don’t wanna run away from a competition with Kiki!’ So she forced herself up there, and then she wound up being absent for a whole week afterward, remember that?”

“You gotta keep yourself conditioned for big races like that, all right?!”

“...”

It wasn’t the conversation that left Maou at a loss for words, it was getting a chance to see Kisaki and Mizushima as they *really* were, outside the workplace. Perhaps noticing this, Mizushima let out a polite cough.

“You know,” she said, “it’s not like I’ve tried to sell my soul to my job or anything. If I’m with friends, I’ll carry on like an idiot, just like anyone else. I’m afraid to lay out my emotions sometimes.”

“R-right.”

She was right, but the gap between this and Kisaki’s above-it-all attitude on the job would be enough to throw anyone.

“B-but how did you guys get so antagonistic in the first place...? I mean, from kindergarten? Really?”

“I don’t remember myself,” Kisaki replied, “but according to my parents...”

“Your parents accepted it?” Maou asked, baffled.

“...During kindergarten, there was this one male teacher all the girls liked a lot. Me and her fought over who’d invite him to play house with us, and that’s apparently how it got started.”

“Just because of *that*?”

She made it sound like a very wholesome kind of younger-years argument, but did things like that really trigger an age-old, never-ending clash of wills?

“Well, how did *you* get involved, Ms. Mizushima?”

“I was kind of like the cushion between Kiki and Hime. If Kiki was crying ‘cause she lost to Hime, I’d console her. If Hime was all angry ‘cause Kiki beat her, I’d help her work some of the stress out.”

Maou was about to ask why she’d take on such a difficult, thankless job, but stopped himself. It must’ve shown on his face, though.

“You know, whatever they thought about it, I was never bored around those two. And they’d cause a lot of trouble if you left them alone, but if you could point them in the right direction, that made a lot of things go better in class. I was class president a few times, so...”

“I see...”

In a way, Mizushima was the puppet master, pulling the strings of Kisaki and Himeko. Maou was starting to sense that *she* wasn’t anyone to trifle with, either.

“And, you know, they always put a lot of effort into their studies, so they were near the top of the class in test scores and stuff. They always put up the names of the top twenty scorers in the final exams, and it always made me sick to my stomach, because whether it was Kiki over Hime or the other way around, they’d always fight over it.”

“That just sounds like sarcasm coming from you, Yuki,” Kisaki muttered sullenly. “I don’t think me and Himeko ever beat *you* in those rankings.”

“Hey,” the breezy Mizushima replied, “if I wanted to keep hanging with you guys, I needed to work for it. But whichever way it turned out, I think we were pretty good friends, you know? All three of us. Maybe not BFFs or whatever, but not like...you know, ‘hey, wanna hang in the bathroom with me,’ right? Like what you saw with a lot of girls.”

“That’s a lame joke. She was never a friend to me once. We just stayed

together because you said so, Yuki.”

It made Maou realize it all over again. Mizushima: the one woman capable of bringing Kisaki and Himeko Tanaka together, despite everything. Scary.

After graduating middle school, they went on to separate high schools, which theoretically would’ve brought an end to this epic battle. But then, three years later, they all ran into each other at the same university.

“Wow,” Maou said, getting used to the atmosphere, “it’s like destiny or something.”

“Yeah, well, we all lived near each other, so... But by the time you’re college age, you’d assume that we’d be kinder and more mature with each other, right? Wrong.”

Instead, Kisaki and Tanaka, both studying business administration at Meiji University, picked up right where they’d left off, albeit on a new level.

“While we were in school, the economy was down the toilet and grads were having the worst time finding decent jobs. We all knew that, so we worked as hard as we could in all our classes...and that kind of kicked things off again.”

“Even now, I question the sanity of the professor who gave Himeko’s report on educational management theory an A. Proposing this systematic approach without keeping employee personalities or any other unexpected elements in mind. I mean, who is she kidding?”

“...Yeah. So that’s where the battle started up again.”

“I see.”

All he could do was grin. Now Kisaki and Tanaka weren’t fighting about results—they were arguing about theories and processes, too. It just threw their competition into further confusion.

“But the real clincher was that ‘Miss Meiji’ contest, wasn’t it?”

“Miss Meiji? You mean like those beauty pageants you see on TV?”

“Yeah. Our school just had a small campus festival each year, so we’re talking basically a glorified dress-up show. It’s not like winning would get you scouted for TV gigs. But anyway, they held a Miss Meiji pageant, and the friends we had

in our study groups persuaded all three of us to try out.”

“Ah...”

Maou recalled the words Kisaki and Himeko had exchanged: *“Well, that’s a surprise. That stupid little show has stuck around this long in your mind?” “I should say so. It was a good college memory for me—’cause unlike you, I’m not so contrarian all the time that I can’t take a compliment.”*

“So, um, did Ms. Tanaka beat you, perhaps?”

“Who *cares* if she beat me in some stupid party game like that?!”

The reaction, all too easy to read, told Maou everything he needed to know. Regardless of its size, it was a beauty competition between the two women, and Kisaki ate Himeko’s dust. If Himeko was still bringing it up to this day, it must’ve wounded Kisaki terribly—but if Maou tried to console her about that, he’d have nothing but an infinitely expanding hell waiting for him.

“I mean, isn’t it just pathetic? Her, thinking she’s all that because she’s some C-grade beauty queen! What difference does second or third place even *make* if you aren’t number one, anyway?!”

Kisaki gulped down the rest of her oolong tea like it was stiff liquor and slammed the glass against the table. Presumably, Maou thought, this meant Tanaka took second place and Kisaki placed third. That had to be it.

“Oh, I was first, by the way.”

“Please, Ms. Mizushima, don’t give me more information than I need right now...”

He had anticipated this twist at the end of the tale. But getting an earful of his boss’s past life was enough to deal with in one night. He couldn’t deal with any more of their wheedling inside jokes.

“Well, anyway, now you know what Kiki and Hime were like.”

“I’d say so, yeah. More than I ever needed to.”

Once they reached their junior year, the battle encompassed both their pecking order and the validity of their pet theories, with a new and emphasized focus on their visions for future employment. Their friends used to compare

them to a bride bickering with her new mother-in-law, and they were only half-joking.

“With their job hunt, Kiki was, like, *super* gung-ho. If you aren’t the lead dog, the view never changes; that kinda thing. Meanwhile, Hime was more about hiding behind that lead dog and jumping over him to the finish line when it counts, kind of thing.”

Mizushima managed to wrangle them well enough during school, but once they graduated the two of them were guaranteed to take different paths. And, indeed, the paths they took through MgRonald and Sentucky—two similar, but very different companies—couldn’t have looked less alike. With Kisaki, the conventional wisdom was that her care for each individual employee often led to clashes with management around her, slowing her career path despite her exceptional performance and popularity. Tanaka, on the other hand, didn’t focus as much on her staff, but she carried out her assigned work perfectly enough at each location to put up real results that landed that promotion.

They hadn’t told each other that, of course. *That* all went through Mizushima. If Mizushima and Kisaki met up, she’d talk all about it with Himeko, leaving out anything truly damaging. If she and Himeko met up, she’d talk all about that with Kisaki, keeping it safely in the realm of chitchat. It was a weird sort of love triangle, one Mizushima had been cultivating since their early years.

“So that’s why you knew about people working at Sentucky, Ms. Kisaki?”

Himeko Tanaka had probably talked about her assignment with Mizushima, and from Mizushima, it went right over to Kisaki. Thanks to that, Maou now knew about the discord between those two, and the reason why Kisaki acted out like she had.

“Really, nothing’s changed with our relationship, but after everything that’s piled up, when I saw her for the first time in a while, it just made my blood boil, and... Then you had to see that. I’m sorry.”

Kisaki bowed her head to Maou again.

“Oh, not at all...but why are you telling me all this? None of us thought you were attacking her at random. We just figured it was something kind of hard to talk about.”

“Well, to be honest, I didn’t think Yuki was gonna be *this* forthcoming with you, either. I just wanted to explain things to you and apologize, Marko, since you took the brunt of it. I’m planning to apologize to Chi and the rest along the same lines. I want to put this behind me.”

“You never stopped me, Kiki.” Mizushima plinked the ice around her otherwise-empty glass before bringing a hand to her chin. “But you’re right. Maybe I said too much. But I had a good reason why I figured it was okay for Maou to hear it.”

She flashed a conflicted grin, then looked at Maou, eyes squinting.

“It seems like Kiki really trusts you. That’s rare for her.”

“Trust?”

From Maou’s viewpoint, there wasn’t an employee on the team Kisaki didn’t trust. That didn’t seem to be what Mizushima meant.

“The only people who knew about Kiki’s dreams until now were me and Hime. When she said she told you, that really surprised me.”

Her dream: to be the Italian ideal of a barista, an expert in every aspect of restaurant service. She wanted to test herself out, to see how far her skills could take her in Japan’s hospitality industry. She said so herself, to Maou and Chiho.

“...Well, it’s not because I think you alone are that special, Marko. We just had the opportunity to talk about it, that’s all.”

Kisaki was trying to defend herself, but it sounded needlessly evasive to Maou. She was hiding the real truth of it, and Mizushima felt it, too.

“Really?”

She looked up from the probing gaze she was giving Kisaki.

“But I’ve never heard you tell anyone besides us before now. Isn’t that right, Hime?”

““Huh?!””

Gasps of surprise leaped out of Maou’s and Kisaki’s mouth.

On the other side of the partition behind Maou's back, a woman's voice rang out.

"...You're right. I haven't, either."

Nobody needed to ask who it was. Himeko Tanaka was even wearing the same pantsuit from this afternoon.

"Yuki... You tricked me!"

The fires of Kisaki's rage burned anew.

"You yelled at me all high-and-mighty about apologizing to Marko, and you had Himeko listen in the whole time?!"

"I had to, or else you'd never agree to see her."

"Well, yeah," Himeko Tanaka said as she helped herself to the empty chair next to Maou. "If I was drinking face-to-face with Mayumi, I'd probably get sick to my stomach. I don't like that sweet-potato *shochu*; that's an old-people drink. Give me Kahlúa and milk any day."

"Oh, you *love* that sweet stuff, huh? You have the taste buds of an eight-year-old."

"As if I need someone who turns bright red after one beer telling me that."

"That's just my face, okay?! I don't actually get drunk off it!"

"All right, enough, guys. You're weirding out Maou. Let's eat this stuff while it's hot, all right?"

"Oh...uh, sorry."

"Pfft."

Kisaki and Himeko both glared at Maou, nailing him to his seat before he could make his escape. The table was now full of all the classic tasty, calorie-filled *izakaya* favorites, from *teppanyaki* meat to fried rice, and Mizushima briskly divided it up into portions for everyone.

"I stopped by your restaurant again this evening," Himeko said as she sipped her Kahlúa and milk.

"You what?"

“And I’m impressed. There isn’t a location in my region as well put together as that one. Everyone’s lively and energetic. There’s no pointless chitchat, but they all communicate perfectly with each other. The meal they brought out was a top performer, and I didn’t see a speck of dust in the place.”

“Being complimented by you does nothing to please me, but they *are* my crew. Of course I’d expect them to do that much.”

“‘My crew,’ huh...?” Himeko sniffed at her—and just like that, the praise ended. “Mayumi, are you all right with that? Sitting there at that MgRonald location the rest of your life, with that smug little sense of pride?”

She paused just long enough to give her a sarcastic smile.

“You know, I always thought it was strange that you joined a company as big as MgRonald. A huge corporation like that, I really don’t think there’s a lot of skills or ideas you can leverage in a start-up shop like what you’re picturing. Why don’t you try to go independent now, instead of later?”

“What?”

“But you wanna do more than run a café right now, don’t you? If that’s all you want, you should just quit, find an empty restaurant space, and open up your own place. If you work a little at it, you’ll do just fine! So why don’t you do that? It’s not like you don’t have leads when it comes to investors and guarantors and stuff, is it? Acting like you’re king of the hill at the bottom rung of a corporation accomplishes nothing for you. Even with all the performance you’ve put in, if you aren’t getting promoted as fast as I am, what’s the point?”

“Himeko,” Kisaki hissed quietly, “are you making fun of me for working at MgRonald?”

“No. I’m making fun of you because you’re just sitting there, locked in your tiny restaurant, griping at everyone instead of using your talents to get promoted.” Himeko gave her glass an irritated rattle. “Is it really worth the passion you put into your work, staying in that one location the whole time, when you could be running one or two regions, or even cutting them apart and making your own region? Or did something happen to you that made you switch gears?”

“...”

Kisaki answered the shower of questions with silence. It indicated to the table that she had, at least, accepted what Himeko said.

“If you run after two different things, you aren’t gonna catch either of them, Mayumi. As long as you’re working for a big firm, I know you aren’t childish enough to fail to understand that sometimes, you gotta ignore the moment-to-moment stuff and look at the big picture.”

“That...”

“Come on. What are you thinking? Lemme hear it.”

Kisaki, almost rendered helpless for a moment, glared right back at Himeko.

“I’m free to do whatever I want to. I don’t need to tell you.”

Maou was afraid they’d come to blows all over again. But instead, Tanaka gave her an unexpected smile.

“All right. I’m not trying to ask for your life plan or anything. If you wanna stay in that restaurant and pretend you have a big happy family down there forever, that’s no problem, either, all right? I’ll just keep getting promoted so I can laugh at you from up on high, then.”

“You never did have any respect for the people you work with.”

“In that most people around me aren’t worthy of it, yes. That’s why you need to treat everyone like they’re on the same playing field. That’s one of the many truths Japanese business has cultivated over the years.”

Tanaka turned to Maou.

“And I don’t know if, for example, this bleary-eyed kid over here’s worth respecting or not, but if you wanna get the better of me someday, then let me make it perfectly clear: You’re never gonna do it, the way you are now.”

“‘Bleary-eyed’...?”

The sudden jab annoyed Maou, but the two corporations involved made it hard for him to rebuke her too strongly. They were in the same industry, but socially speaking, Himeko was far above him.

The sight just made Himeko laugh again. “You know, at a time like this, if you can do something besides jump out at me or slink back to your cubbyhole, that’s gonna be an asset for you later on.”

“...Yeah.”

“Just remember this: In any organization, you’re going to have lots of enemies—on the inside *and* the outside. You have competing companies, taking advantage of any crack in your armor to trip you up. You have malicious, talentless bosses, coworkers, and subordinates, all dragging you down. You’ll find people like them all over the place. If you wanna find a way to deal with people like that, then you’re never going to find it working under Mayumi and her lust to keep everybody happy.”

Maou flashed the quickest of glances at Kisaki. The sight of her nemesis almost made her explode before, but now she was listening intently.

“I’m sure Mayumi’s a comfortable person to work for if you want to remain a frontline foot soldier your whole life. But if you’re aiming higher than that, then I have to say I really feel sorry for you right now. You won’t gain any experience fighting your enemies that way.”

“Oh, but if you’re working under Kiki, you’re getting to work with much better people than elsewhere. That can boost some of your skills, can’t it?”

“You and I view it differently. The friends you make as you’re slogging through that enemy-infested battlefield, all hurt and wounded, are the ones you’ll boost your abilities with.”

Tanaka was right—and so was Mizushima. And Kisaki’s approach, one Maou believed was correct up to now, was still the right one. But as much as they seemed to go together, none of them seemed to ever line up.

“Well,” Maou replied, untroubled, “if there’s anything on the table right now that I can’t do, then I can just build my chair from the ground up and make it big enough that I *can* do it, right?”

“!”

“Ooh!”

“Hmph.”

Kisaki looked up at him as an impressed Mizushima put her hands together. Tanaka gave the statement a snuffle, but not quite as derisive as before.

“Yeah, it’s your dream, not Mayumi’s. You think you wanna start a business? That’s just the kind of reckless thinking I like—it sure beats people who spend all day worrying and whining about how everything’s so unfair, even though they can’t do anything themselves. But that’s a lot easier said than done, you realize.”

“I know. If I had money, or people, or an education, I couldn’t ask for much more, but for now all I’ve got is my mouth and my body.”

Himeko Tanaka blinked at him for a moment, then nodded, for reasons known only to her.

“...True. Mayumi?”

“...What?”

“I think I see why you value this guy.”

“Right?” interjected Mizushima. “He’s really going places, isn’t he?”

“Huh...?”

Maou gave the two of them blank stares.

“...Marko?”

“Y-yeah?”

“Are you all right on time? Your friend’s probably going to be worried if you don’t go home soon.”

“Oh? Ah! Whoa, it’s already one thirty?!”

Maou jumped out of his seat the moment he saw his watch. Come to think of it, he hadn’t contacted anyone to say he’d be late.

“Aw, going home already? This was just getting interesting.”

“Oh, Maou, we can’t eat all this by ourselves. You mind finishing some of this off for me?”

“Um, y-yeah, sure.”

As instructed, Maou began working on the food in front of him.

“Are you living with your girlfriend? That’s pretty bold at your age.”

“It’s just a roommate, Himeko. He lives with another man.”

“Oh? Is that your kind of thing?”

“Whoa! Is that true, Maou?!”

“I’m not gonna ask what you mean by ‘that kind of thing,’ but no.”

Maou knew that the inebriated Mizushima and Himeko would just rib him no matter what he said. He decided to focus on his late dinner.

Mizushima and Himeko said their good-byes to Maou and Kisaki outside.

“He ‘couldn’t ask for much more,’ huh?”

“Hime?”

“‘If I had money, or people, or an education, I couldn’t ask for much more.’ But that’s not impossible at all. If you understand that, that’ll make you strong. And once you’re strong, you can do all kinds of stuff—but if you screw up or it blows up on you, that causes a lot of damage around you.”

“True. But...” Mizushima smiled as she watched Maou and Kisaki fade in the distance. “Sometimes, one person can be dangerous, but two can be a powerhouse.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“Mmm...” She smiled at Himeko’s puzzled question. “I meant exactly what it sounded like. This *is* Kiki we’re talking about.”



“Sorry about that. I guess Yuki got you caught up in my business all over again.”

On the way back from the *izakaya*, Kisaki apologized to Maou once again as they walked down the Koshu-Kaido sidewalk.

“No, it’s all right. It was kind of like being invited to a managerial get-

together.”

“A get-together, huh? You know, now that I think about it, that’s the first time all three of us were together since we graduated.”

Kisaki sighed, as if longing for the past.

“Ms. Kisaki?”

“...Marko, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea when I say this. Just think of it as some drunken ramblings.”

Neither of them had drunk that evening, but Maou nodded anyway.

“If you’re going to work for a company, then Himeko’s far more correct than I am. But for now, though, I can’t run away from my ideals. I can’t, because I ran into someone like you.”

“...Huh?”

“If you hadn’t shown up, maybe I would’ve taken real steps toward running my own place faster, like Himeko said. But when you started working at my location, something changed my thinking.”

“Um...?”

“You said you wanted a full-time position sometime, right? Do you still feel that way?”

“I...well...”

The situation around Maou had changed greatly in the past year. His prospects for returning to the demon realms were brighter, and he had had to deal with one disaster after the other. But the one constant that remained within him was a desire to learn more about the human world.

“I still do, yeah. I can’t get around that, if I want to reach my goals.”

“Mmm. I’ve never doubted your work ethic, or your philosophy. I don’t know many people so involved with my work and private life like this. That’s why I didn’t know what to do. I wanted you to...”

“Hmm?”

Maou was surprised at what almost sounded like a confession of her love to

him. But her words went far beyond any such imaginings.

“I honestly don’t know whether I should make you my right-hand man and climb up to the peak of McGonald management, or take you on as my partner in a new restaurant.”

“.....Huh?”

“If I want to change the world, or create a new one, I need friends I can trust from the heart more than anything else.”

That was something Maou knew internally long before Kiseki told him. After all, when he’d set off to unify the demon realms, all he had was the knowledge that angel imparted on him.

“And among all the people on the crew, the only one with a future free enough to keep working with me long-term is you.”

After saying all that, she paused for a moment.

“...Well, like I said, just drunken ramblings. You don’t have any duty to put up with my dreams, and I don’t intend to tie down your future. We’re just a bunch of drunken would-be managers in passing, trying to get our hands on promising young people to work with. Forget about it for now.”

Maou blankly stared at Kiseki as she walked away—this woman in street clothes he mainly knew in the armor of her work outfit; this woman who lived for her work.

“But...”

She turned around, looking refreshed as always.

“I don’t make a habit of telling jokes that aren’t funny. You get me? Anyway, I’m going a different way from here. Take care of the restaurant for me for the next couple days.”

Then she waved and gallantly ventured forth, across the intersection and into the sleeping city. Maou watched her until she disappeared, then scratched his head as he looked up at the heavens.

“Oh, brother...”



“Daaamn youuu, Maaaaaaaaaaaaaou!!”

At their regular Devil’s Castle dinner meet-up the next day, Maou was brutally attacked by an archangel.

“Damn you to hell, Devil King! You were prancing around town all last night, along with my...my...my goddess! What could you possibly have been doing?! Depending on the answer, I could cut you down right here!”

“Bffhh!!”

It was enough to make Chiho spit out the wheat tea she was sipping. Maou had no idea how they’d found out; someone must have seen him leaving the *izakaya* with Kisaki.

“M-M-Maou?! Alone with Ms. Kisaki in the middle of the night... What were you *doing* with her?!”

“N-nothing! We just drank for a little while at an *izakaya*...”

“Y-you drank?! You and Ms. Kisaki, alone at night, drinking?! Did you do any *other* grown-up stuff?!”

Whatever Chiho was imagining had already made her face turn red.

“You said an *izakaya*, my liege?”

“A-Ashiya? Is that really the word that should be grabbing your attention?”

“How much did you spend? Honestly, arriving home late at night, wasting our money again...”

Maou fled to the opposite wall, retreating from the gravelly voice of his most trusted servant.

“N-no, they paid, they paid! I didn’t spend anything. And I said we drank, but I just mean it was part of the meal; I wasn’t actually—”

“My goddess paid for you...and shared drinks face-to-face?! I’ll kill you! I swear I’ll kill you today!!”

The interrogating Sarii grabbed Maou by the collar. Maou violently ripped his arm away.

“It wasn’t one-on-one! We were with your boss and the manager from the

Fushima-en location...”

“That manager? The one with the reputation for beauty? M-Maou... You were with three hot women, they paid for you, and you drank into the night... Ohhh...”

Maou’s excuses did nothing. Chiho looked about ready to faint. Emi nimbly provided some side support.

“Ch-Chiho! Stay with us!”

“Manager Tanaka, my goddess, and a third woman?! Damn you, Devil King! What sort of evil machinations did you carry out to do something I’m so...so, so envious of?! Tell me! What do you have to do to make that happen?! Say it! *Saaaaaaaay* it!!”

Sariel grabbed him again, shedding tears as he threatened (or maybe pleaded with) Maou.

“I told you guys, nothing happened... All we did was talk about work...”

He wasn’t lying. But there was no denying that the topics ventured beyond the day-to-day routine quite a bit. Stating that would only add to the chaos, he knew, so he didn’t—but everyone in the room seemed to pick up on that nuance anyway, so this all-out assault on Maou showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

“Devil King! Drinking late into the night... Could you stop setting a bad example for Alas Ramus, please?!”

“I can believe you, right, Maou?! You were only talking about work?!”

“This is not a matter of having them pay for you! If your superior gives you something, it is your duty to pay that back! Do you understand that, Your Demonic Highness?!”

“Saaaaaaaay iiiiiiiiiiit, Devil King! What happened between you twoooooooo?!”

“Nothing happened! I sweeeaaaaarrrr!!”

Unable to take the shouted accusations thrown around the tiny apartment any longer, Suzuno snapped.

“Quiet down *now*, everyone! We are *supposed* to be eating!!”

“Suzu-Sis, you’re scaaarry!!”

Now Alas Ramus started to cry. And in the middle of the pandemonium, only Urushihara was calm enough to keep eating.

“...Shut up, dudes.”

**A
FEW
DAYS
AGO:
THE HERO
IS (ABOUT
TO BE)
A PART-
TIMER!**



A FEW DAYS AGO: THE HERO IS (ABOUT TO BE) A PART-TIMER!

A little past three in the afternoon, Alas Ramus began lightly snoozing on the bed. Normally she'd be alone with her mommy, Emi Yusa, in Room 501 of the Urban Heights apartment building, but today there were two visitors. Dealing with strangers for so long must have tired her out.

"Aww," marveled one of the guests a distance away, "I wish I could put her to sleep like thaaat."

"It'll probably be a little while longer before she's fully used to you, Eme."

"Awwwww..."

Emeralda Etuva, Emi's best friend, gritted her teeth in frustration.

"Maybe this ain't welcome news to you, but you're an expert mom, huh?"

Rika Suzuki, Emi's other best friend, grinned at her.

"Yeah, well, I've been with her a while now," she replied, brushing it off.

"Ooh." Rika looked a bit happy to hear that. "Totally unflappable, huh? Y'know, I know you haven't received the offer yet, but you're gonna be working at Maggie's, huh? Not to make fun of you, but are you ever gonna take Alas Ramus with you while you work with Daddy?"

"No way. I can't bring a baby with me to work. She'll have to be fused within me during then—that, or hopefully Suzuno won't mind taking care of her."

Emi shrugged.

"If you're going through thaaat much trouble, I think it might be better to consider moooving."

"I bet she's got an attachment to this place. I can kinda get that, especially considering the quality you're getting for the price. Like, I still have no idea how you managed to find it."

Room 501 of Urban Heights Eifukucho was meant for a single occupant, but it had a decent-sized living room, a kitchen with the full run of electrical appliances, and a toilet separate from the bathroom. Considering that her nemesis—Sadao Maou, aka the Devil King Satan—was living with two other men in a single room maybe a hundred square feet in size, she'd really gotten a lucky break with this space. You could get away with calling it "luxury." There was even a penthouse on the top floor.

"Cerrrtainly, I've never heard her taaalk about that."

Sensing their curiosity, Emi placed a blanket over Alas Ramus up to her shoulders and turned toward them. "Well, I wouldn't exactly call it all good memories, but this was the first place in Japan where I ever found any comfort. Plus, thanks to this apartment, I was able to keep pursuing the Devil King in this city."

"Not in terms of, like, being in a nice place energized you or whatever?"

"No, more of a direct thing. This was back when I first set foot in Japan, when everything was new and unfamiliar to me and I had no idea what was going on."

So Emi began to tell the story, a tale that seemed to take place years ago but was really just a slight distance in the past—the tale of when she chased Satan, the Devil King, through that Gate and plunged into the vast, unfamiliar realm of Japan.



The skyscrapers loomed like giant gravestones, large monoliths of black towering over a city bathed in light. The tiny lamps dotted around town shone their lonely beams, as if positioned to make the structures look as black as possible, flickering on and off like the candles carried at funeral processions.

"Over there...no one will see me..."

She was already at her physical and emotional limits. In this light-soaked world, all she wanted was darkness, a cave where she would never be seen.

"The gate... It won't open."

The front gate, illuminated by yellow light, was fitted with a lock that refused to budge. But by now, she was sure that the building in front of her had nobody

inside.

Over the past few days, she had witnessed enough gigantic dwelling structures that she was sick of them, far taller than any imperial castle from her homeland, light trickling out from every window, but all of them looking inorganic and uninviting from the outside. Inside many of them, people were engaged in activities like none she had seen before. But while this building here looked the same as all the others, it was clearly free of inhabitants. There were merely a string of pale lights along it, like the torches placed to ward off evening intruders at a citadel, but no one seemed to be standing patrol under them.

She probably stood at the site for a good five minutes.

“...I’m going to use this,” she declared to no one in particular, before her body began to lightly float in the air. Jumping over the gate, she landed in a courtyard area.

Nobody seemed to be around. The poorly maintained hedges around the building were just a bit higher than her line of sight, keeping away the prying eyes of outside passersby.

“It doesn’t seem abandoned...”

Approaching the building, she found this one was also made of unfamiliar material. It looked like stone or brick, but felt wholly different from those materials when she touched it. It was smooth, lustrous, hard, but also seemed lightweight.

“Maybe a little higher would be best.”

Looking at the higher floors that melted into the night sky, she floated up once again, following the outer wall as she ascended. She turned around as she did, taking in the light that defied the darkness as far as her vision could see. The colorful lights carpeted the land, as if all the stars in the sky had fallen to earth. The shock when she realized that every flicker indicated human activity was something she thought she’d never forget, no matter what happened to her.

“Devil King,” she whispered, “where did you disappear to?”

He had to be here, somewhere in this land of light she’d chased him into.

Right at this moment, he might be gouging a pit of darkness into this land, his demonic wings beating down over the night sky. She had to find that evil presence as soon as possible and defeat him, before he could snuff out any of the light before her.

“But he’s nowhere to be found. I cannot even sense him...”

It was unthinkable. No matter how wounded he was, how much of his power was gone, there was no mistaking the demonic evil of his existence. But the demon she was chasing had blinked out of existence, as if drowned out by this gigantic whirlpool of light.

“...Will this work?”

She settled down on a corner of one of the terraces situated on every story of the building, partitions set up between each window. Standing there, she looked into the room through an astonishingly transparent pane of glass. It had a wooden floor, but no evidence of habitation. The floor of the terrace above her served as a ceiling, keeping the rain away.

“Hahhh...”

The moment she knew nobody could see her, the fatigue finally won out. She sat right there, on the floor, in this partitioned terrace on a brand-new, yet abandoned building, exhausted enough that even these cramped quarters offered the solace she long sought.

“If I could have finished off the Devil King there, then this...wouldn’t be...”

She clenched her fists tightly, cursing herself. Then, as if responding to her will, light began to gather in her hands, forming something that hadn’t been there before. It was a sword, exquisitely designed and emitting a divine light.

“...My holy sword,” she said, her voice strained. “Why isn’t its guiding light showing me where he is? Did it lose its powers in the battle?”

The sword didn’t answer. The purple jewel in its handle simply shone on, revealing the light of a faraway land, here in this moonless, starless night.

“...Eme,” she groaned, holding her knees. “Al... Olba...” She buried her face in those knees, giving breath to her scratchy voice.

“Help me...”

Emilia Justina, the Hero, had staked the fate of all Ente Isla on one final, climactic battle—but right at the last minute, she failed to slay Satan. Five days had passed since then, after she had chased the Devil King and the Great Demon General Alciel beyond the Gate they had fled through and into this world and its hyper-advanced civilization. One more blow, she thought, should do it—but the Devil King’s power was still nothing to scoff at.

She was sure the real final battle would begin in this world past the Gate, but that presence which felt so ominous in her homeland was nonexistent here. She went through the same Gate they had, so they couldn’t have been sent to some other world. The Devil King and Alciel had to be here, somewhere—but the Satan Emilia knew all too well was nowhere to be found.

It plunged Emilia into a panic.

She had no way of imagining how large this world was, but it was entirely possible that the Gate deposited her in one end of it, and the demons in the other. That would mean a great time delay before they could engage each other again. Satan was powerful enough to turn the Central Continent into a living hell overnight—wounded though he was, that would be more than enough time to annihilate one or two kingdoms on this world. She couldn’t afford to have the Devil King’s Army snuff out any more lives.

Emilia herself was wounded and exhausted by battle, but her desire to fight raged as brightly as ever. She immediately began to search for traces of the Devil King, but right up to today, her efforts were fruitless. Time marched on, allowing her barely anything to eat or sleep upon. She’d been ready to give up yesterday, in fact. But in this land filled with light, there was no safe harbor for Emilia to take advantage of.

“Ugh... I’m so tired...”

The events of the past five days were a cavalcade of unexpected surprises, none of them anything she wanted to ever recall again. She leaned her armored back against the glass window as she reflected on it.

“Haaa...aaaaahhhhh?”

Then the window slid to the side, knocking her off-balance.

“Huh? What’s...? Ah?”

The sword disappeared the moment she hit the floor, but Emilia paid that no attention, instead standing up and taking in the unbelievable sight. The window was open, as if inviting her inside. Beyond was a soundless, unpopulated space, and before she realized it, Emilia had stepped through the opening, tempted by this empty cell.

She hadn’t intended to let her guard down, but not even she could say how much of her wits she had about her at the moment. Even if this was an abandoned building, that didn’t mean she was free to enter it; the lack of dust on the floor indicated that people were here on regular occasions. But Emi, her loneliness and fatigue pushing her emotions far beyond their limits, was unable to resist the offer of a shelter free from prying eyes.

Closing the window behind her, she was greeted by a perfectly silent space.

“Ahh...”

She all but threw herself on the hard floor, sprawling out over it. Her thoughts were still rational enough that she chose not to remove her armor, but for the first time in several days, Emilia tasted a sense of freedom in this enclosed space. At the same time, the fatigue attacked her in waves. As expected—she hadn’t found any place where she could close her eyes and sleep soundly for several days. Her body, her mind, and everything else were at their limits—and the moment she closed those eyes, her consciousness went black.

Soon, she had a dream that took her back to a certain day in her home village of Sloane—a day after she was taken away by the Church to become a Hero, even though she couldn’t have been there to witness it. The Emilia in the dream was lightly running across the village at full speed. Her father should still be there—but, try as she might, she couldn’t seem to locate him, or anyone else for that matter. She searched for one day, then another, in her dream, but couldn’t find any evidence that people dwelled here at all.

Then, in an instant, it all changed dramatically. Hearing an explosion behind her, she turned around to find a humongous demon towering above her, framed by flames shooting behind his back. In one hand was the lifeless body of

someone she knew.

In a flash, Emilia tried to materialize her sword as she ran at the creature—but the weapon never appeared. The demon spun around on the spot, as if unaware of her presence entirely. She wanted to scream at him to wait, but her mouth wouldn't work.

The fire soon spread across the village. What she thought was an empty village was now echoing with screams. Winged demons flitted across the skies, as their grotesque-looking companions came around to destroy the homes. She had to stop them—she had the power to stop them—but the sword was gone. No matter how much she struggled, her legs refused to move forward. She couldn't even speak.

Then a familiar figure descended in front of Emilia. He was small for a demon, but his demonic force was easily that of a thousand of his kin.

“Lucifer!!”

Seeing the inhumane smile of the Great Demon General Lucifer immediately made Emilia attempt to engage him barehanded. But when she tried to punch him in the face, her fist went harmlessly through him, as if swiping at a mirage.

Or perhaps Emilia herself was the mirage the whole time. Why couldn't she fight? She had to stop this tragedy, and yet...

“Aaahhhhhh!!”

Then the scream pierced through her eardrums. From the village, from behind Lucifer, from the skies, from the land—or was it...?

“Gah!!”

Emilia's body jerked upward at the strangely raw but very vivid scream. Opening her eyes, she was greeted not by Sloane being ravaged by demons, but by an unfamiliar, bare-bones square room. It was lit by the sun, not by flames and demonic force, and in another second, Emilia remembered she had sneaked into a mysterious abandoned building last night.

“—!!”

Then she realized how much of an emergency she was in: Someone was

there.

A woman. From this world, no doubt, judging by the common gray, well-tailored clothing she wore. Emilia's back was to the sun, making it easy to see the face of the woman who stood by the door opposite the window Emilia had come in through. A face twisted in horror.

By the looks of things, Emilia was an intruder, and the woman was likely meant to be in this building. Instantly realizing this much, she promptly regretted the mistake she had made last night—of closing, and locking, the window. The lock was similar to the ones she was familiar with back home, making it easy, and now that was biting her back.

Breaking the window would leave evidence of her trespass. *But if it's come to this...!*

“Light Mirror!!”

A holy spell that provided invisibility. She rarely had the opportunity to use it, but it proved useful whenever she wanted to infiltrate a demon-controlled stronghold without needless battle. Since it ran on holy energy, it was often ineffective against higher-level demons, and Emilia herself wasn't that gifted in holy magic—but if someone like Emeralda Etuva cast it, she could even deceive her fellow human sorcerers.

Using it against an enemy you'd already engaged would normally be pointless, since your adversary would know you were there, but it was a good way to escape a confrontation while they were unguarded. The only way out was through the door behind the woman, not the window...but things developed in a way Emilia wasn't expecting.

<“Eeek!!”>

The surprise in the woman's expression and voice turned into fear. Her knees began to shake.

<“She...she, disappeared... Aaaaaaahh!!”>

“Huh? Wait...!”

<“She was really here!!”>

The woman turned white, screaming what sounded like nonsense, and fled so quickly that she ran straight into the door behind her. Emilia was hoping to perhaps strike a vital point and knock her to the ground, but her fleeing in horror just because the intruder had turned invisible was highly unexpected. Emilia's casting was far from perfect—steel your eyes a little, and it wouldn't take a seasoned sorcerer to spot her. Or was she deliberately fleeing because she feared an ambush and hoped to bring the battle to a larger space?

Instinctively, Emilia made a break for the door, attempting to chase the woman.

<“Nfhh!”>

Then she heard a painful-sounding noise and voice from outside. Peering down the long hallway, she found the woman lying facedown on the floor. At the far end was something that resembled a wooden dowel on the floor—and, looking more closely, the shoes the woman wore now had differently-shaped heels on each foot. Emilia knew what high heels were, even if she'd only had the chance to try them a handful of times in her life, so she quickly realized that this stranger had broken a heel as she ran.

She expected the woman to pick herself up quickly, but instead she stayed on the ground, her body lightly trembling.

<“Eee, ah, no...”>

Judging by the way she was dragging herself down the hall to get away from the room, she was still trying to flee. Now, for the first time, Emilia's heart was filled with the dreadful feeling that she had done something terribly wrong.

The woman didn't look like a fighter or sorcerer; Emilia had seen several women dressed like her as she wandered around the world these past five days. She must be just a regular person, managing the building or living in a room Emilia hadn't noticed. In that case, the only villain here—sneaking into a building without permission just because the window was open, then threatening a woman for no reason—was the girl in the armor.

Slowly, Emilia opened the door. Despite being made of something heavy-looking like metal or stone, it was much lighter than she'd expected. The hinges creaked a little.

<“Ah... Ah, ah, no, ah...”>

The woman, still on the floor, turned around. She was shedding tears now. Emilia had to apologize for scaring her, and for going into that room in the first place. So she slowly approached her, still wearing her heavy armored boots, which clanged loudly across what felt like the single sheet of rock that covered the floor.

<“N-no! What...What is that?! Who’s there?! S-stay away, stay away from me!”>

The woman shook her head violently as the tears dampened her face, apparently looking for something but never looking at Emilia herself. Emilia didn’t know nearly enough of the language to know what the woman was saying, but she could tell these weren’t exactly tears of joy she was shedding. So she knelt down and, with some difficulty, repeated the apparent greeting she had heard many times in this country.

<“H...Haah...”>

<“Eek!”>

<“How, ya...doing...?”>

This time, a sound that hardly sounded human at all erupted from the woman’s throat.

<“Noooooooooooo! That voice is coming from nowhere!!”>

“Huh?! Ah, wait, wait!”

It was too late to call for reason. The woman threw off her shoes and frantically half-crawled away down the corridor.

“W-wait a minute! Y-you’re going to...”

<“Noooooooo...!!”>

She must have run into a stairway beyond Emilia’s sight. The Hero at first thought she might’ve fallen again, but once her shoes were off, the woman quickly sped away from the scene, her screams gradually fading from Emilia’s ears.

“Y-you don’t have to be that scared...”

Yes, she was a trespasser, but she’d also been demonstrating a desire to communicate, hadn’t she? Emilia frowned, her feelings hurt a bit. Then she noticed a large, black object at her feet. It appeared to be a bag made of high-quality leather, with a brand-new gold clasp.

“...Huh?”

Looking at the well-polished metal surface made Emilia realize something. She brought a hand up to her eyes...then sighed.

“That...*would* be scary I suppose, yes. She can’t see me, but she saw the door open, and those footsteps and my voice...”

She had wholly forgotten to undo the invisibility spell before approaching her. If that unfortunate woman looked closely enough, she could’ve been able to see at least the shimmering outline of Emilia, but she must’ve been too terrified to notice.

Either way, she now knew for sure that this building was neither abandoned nor a safe haven for her. She felt bad about terrorizing that woman, but it wouldn’t be smart to stick around now. She might call for a constable or soldier, and then Emilia would have to engage in violent measures against a fellow human being—something she absolutely didn’t want.

“I wonder if she’ll come back to get this...? But...”

Emilia’s eyebrows slanted downward as she looked up. She hadn’t noticed it when she awoke, but the sunlight that made it through her room’s window had apparently come during sunset. The sky visible from this corridor was now a shade of purple; night was returning. It made her realize just how tired she was. Now, with a clearer mind, all the errors in judgment she’d made were painfully obvious.

“I don’t know who that woman was,” she said as she picked up the bag and headed down the hall, “but if someone lives here, this might get stolen sooner or later...”

Then the sight of all the pieces of paper in the bag made her stop.

“...”

It felt like there was an assortment of objects inside it.

“.....”

She pondered this for a moment.

“...!”

She gave her surroundings a careful look around, then slunk back to the dwelling she'd been in. Somehow managing to lock the door, she sat in the middle of its empty main chamber, facing the bag and looking at herself in its metal clasp. It made her take a deep breath.

“I swear by the Church, the Better Half, and the name of my father that I will not steal your belongings. I will not reveal or abuse the knowledge I gain. So... allow me to learn a little more about this world, if you could.”

She rummaged around the bag—something that should have shamed her as a person, much less a Hero. But right now, before her eyes was the knowledge Emilia needed to live in this land and find the Devil King. If someone were to bring her to task for this crime, she would gladly accept the blame and atone for it. Steeling her resolve, she undid the clasp.

Perhaps a good half-day passed with her sitting there. It was now deep into the following night, darkness draping the room. Emilia had summoned a holy magic-driven ball of light to dispel it, giving her the illumination needed to explore every inch of the bag.

It was her first chance to examine the belongings of an average person on this world. The woman was bound to be back for it sooner or later—and when she did, Emilia would have to give it all back and leave this room. The clock was ticking.

“This must be money. A coin with a hole in the middle’s pretty uncommon.”

Emilia lined up every coin and piece of paper she fished out from the smooth, leathery bag on the floor and nodded. The coins had designs of temple-like buildings, flowers, trees, rice plants, and so on. They didn’t seem to contain very much gold, silver, or copper, but it wasn’t hard to imagine all of this as

currency. The scraps of paper, meanwhile, featured dazzling patterns, portraits of people, and other intricately detailed pieces of art, as well as the same written text she had seen on the coins.

The text in question came in ten different characters: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 0. If these were numbers, it implied these were paper bills. She understood the concept of that, at least, but this was only the second country she'd been to where she'd seen it. The first had been a seaside port city on the Central Continent, but as one of her companions had put it, the impact of the Devil King's Army on the land made the currency so worthless that it wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.



Any bill or coin had to have the absolute trust of its issuing nation behind it in order to function—and with paper as light as this, it had to be worth a comparatively tremendous amount of money. The bag's owner hadn't looked much older than Emilia, but was this nation safe and prosperous enough that even someone like her would walk around with vast sums of money?

“Either way, I doubt I'll get much use out of the gold and silver coins I have...”

Emilia had none of these paper bills, and while the coins had a silvery color, they didn't appear to be minted from straight silver. While she knew they depicted numbers, she had no idea what their order was. It'd be a waste of time to consider this currency any longer for now.

The next thing she devoted her attention to was a large map. Opening it up, she found it made once again of high-quality paper. It appeared to be a simple one-color outline map, but looking closely, she found it covered with a vast array of (what she concluded was) numbers. Even before she came here, she'd had some impression of this nation's advanced printing skill, but seeing all these tiny numbers covering the map every which way made her jaw drop.

“These numbers may not be referring to money. Perhaps they are distances, or perhaps they are assigned to certain roads... There's some sort of system to them, anyway. The roads have arrows, along with four characters on them. Two circled characters for larger regions. And this is...four characters, but they're circled in a different way from the others... Either it's a large road or a river. Hmm... The red text must have been written in later.”

In the midst of this businesslike map, nothing but roads and regions and numbers, something was written in red ink.

“Is the red mark in the middle *this* building?”

Despite her semi-delirious, sleep-deprived state yesterday, she had a general idea of what her surroundings looked like. It made her realize that this outline map covered a fairly limited area centered around this building.

“So the numbers between the arrows are distances. And the distance from one edge of this arrow to the other one is the unit distance represented by these four-digit numbers! These ten characters definitely have to be numbers,

then!”

If “1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8/9/0” were the ten numbers, it meant this nation ran on the decimal counting system. Even that was a great leap forward. If she could figure out the order they went by, she should be able to figure out things like money and distances to some extent.

“But this distance and that distance look the same to me. Why’re the numbers on them different...?”

The printed numerals were so small that Emi had to strengthen the magic-driven light to view them.

“There are a lot of similar combinations around the areas marked in red. And *these* buildings are marked differently, too. I’ll have to go over there myself before I... Huh? What’s this...?”

Then Emilia realized that another map was in the bag.

“Hmm? Is this a map of the same place?”

This map was printed in bright red and blue tones, with a far larger number of written-in notes on it. Regions that were more loosely circled in the outline map were delineated in detail here, each festooned with a large variety of text characters. This map also featured a picture and some larger text in every direction, designed in a way that reminded Emilia of a storefront sign.

“Hmm... This looks more like the maps I’m used to.”

The larger cities in Emilia’s world featured advertisements put up by the merchant guilds that provided maps to the stores and other important facilities around town. By Emilia’s estimation, this was something similar.

The discovery also opened another problem in her mind.

“This...is gonna be kind of tough.”

Staring at the blue-printed map, she found the text on it featured an endless array of different characters, each hopelessly complex in design. This nation used a lot of different *types* of characters, something it hadn’t taken her long to spot upon arriving. Just looking at this map alone, there seemed to be three or four or five different writing systems at work. If these were all phonetic

symbols, she knew she was in trouble—and if they were ideographs, representing concepts instead of pronunciation, this wasn't something she could decipher in a day or two.

“Unless I exercise my Idea Link muscles, this is going to be such a pain...”

Idea Link was a mightily useful thing when venturing into a land where you didn't know the local language, but it didn't provide a perfect translation. Unless both sides of the conversation had the same concept in mind, the meaning you attempted to convey could often come across as something totally different and unintelligible. In the case of traveling around Ente Isla, at least one member of her group would have a grasp of whatever language was needed, or they could hire an interpreter if necessary, but that wasn't an option here.

“If I just had a chance to talk for a good while with someone...”

Emilia hadn't had the opportunity to exchange too many words with people here yet. One look at her and most people demonstrated a clear disinterest in dealing with her, and being chased by the constables wasn't what you could really call conversation. The only words she knew so far were what her ears picked up on the street—the “how ya doing” she heard when people spoke face-to-face with each other; the “welcome, welcome” shopkeepers used to make people venture inside; the “come here” and “be nice” parents used to calm their children; the “freeze” and “don't move” and “get over here” shouted by the constabulary when they wanted to catch you.

“Hang on...”

Then Emilia noticed the same text, in the same handwriting, on both maps.

“Here it is!”

It was inside the leather wallet that held the paper bills. Apart from money, it contained a selection of colorful, multi-textured cards, all structured and printed in the same fashion; each featured the same small string of characters.

“Here, too.”

Inside an even smaller leather card case she found another stack of cards, each with the exact same string of characters as before. This stack was more varied, detailed, and colorful than the bills, even featuring a portrait of a person

drawn to an exhaustively close likeness. Seeing it, Emilia could now be sure.

“That woman... She owns this bag. So...this has to be her name.”

She must've written her name on the map to make it clear who owned it. Emilia couldn't say what all the variations in her card collection were for, but one of them featured a red cross inside an almond-shaped shield, like one used by knights. A sign that she was affiliated with a military corps, perhaps?

“I wish I knew how to pronounce her name, at least... Is there anything else?”

Inside the dark room, Emilia continued to rifle through the bag, seeking hints about this woman and the nation she called home.

“Hmm... This sheaf of papers is probably for business purposes. Is this a handkerchief? That's a very pretty color... And this card has numbers and a name, too. And this is a glass bottle with water inside...or not? What kind of light, soft, see-through material is this made of? It has some text and a picture of a mountain on it, but I can't read it... Otherwise, a lot of this looks the same... What's this?”

Emilia discovered something truly odd in one of the outer pockets. It was a flat board of sorts, the size of her palm, rigid, square, and painted in assorted gaudy colors. It was heavy for its size, a leather strap attached to it from the edge. There were lots of small projections around it, along with a hole that looked large enough to insert something into.

“That's weird... Is this a button? ...Ah?!”

The moment she clumsily touched one of the buttons, the board's surface lit up, causing a shocked Emilia to drop it on the floor. Would it explode? Or let out a blinding flash of light? Or was it a trap to ward off would-be bag thieves? Whatever it was, it made her leap back in self-defense.

But the board simply emitted its light, doing nothing else. Slowly, ever so gingerly, she looked back at it.

“Ah... That's cute...”

Within the light was a picture of what looked like a bear, although the drawing was heavily simplified from the real thing. It was clinging to a pillow as

it lay on its back, sleeping. Above it floated four numbers.

“The...the numbers are moving?”

The moment she gazed at them, the number on the far right changed from a “1” to a “2.” It was another mystery for Emilia to unravel as she picked up the board.

<“Ahhhh?!”>

“Huh?”

The door to the corridor had been opened at some point. She thought she had locked it, but when Emilia looked up, she saw someone there. There was no way she could forget that face, tensed in terror in the light of her magic. It was that woman again, the one who’d left her bag behind.

This time, Emilia didn’t think about running. She had to apologize for trespassing, and for inspecting her bag. The moment she extended a hand to attempt it:

<“Hyaaagghh!!”>

The woman let out a shrill scream and bounded out into the corridor again.

“W-wait a minute! No, wait, hang on, um...!”

Emilia tried her best to remember what those constables yelled at her as she ran.

<“Halt! Freeze!”>

But despite Emilia being completely visible this time, the woman didn’t halt at all.

<“Yaaaaaahaahhhh! A will-o’-the-wisp and a samurai ghost!!”>

“...Will o the wisp samoorai gosst?”

Emilia was puzzled by these unfamiliar terms. But she had to give back the bag, and if the woman got away now, she had no idea when she’d see her again. So Emilia chased after her, attempting to stop her.

<“Stay where you are! Stop resisting!”>

<“Noooooooooooo!”>

<“Welcome, welcome!”>

<“Stay awaaaaaaaay!!”>

<“Come here! Come here!!”>

<“I don’t wanna diiiieeeee!! This building’s cursed!!”>

Emilia’s calls echoed across the building, bouncing off its walls repeatedly, but were almost fully drowned out by the woman’s high-pitched screaming. She tried to reach her, but she had disappeared in one direction or other along the corridor, lost to her again. Emilia could hear the sound of someone descending a staircase whose location was still a mystery to her.

She was gone—and this time, Emilia had *really* spooked her. This “samoorai gosst” must have been someone really strange and mythical in this world, at least that much she could tell, but even then it seemed like the woman was overreacting quite a bit. Something about the term “will o the wisp samoorai gosst” sounded incredibly sinister. Perhaps she was being marked as a violent criminal or something.

“Hmm... Maybe this armor isn’t the best idea.”

Giving it some thought, she considered a few elements that might arouse suspicion. She had arrived here fresh from her final battle with the Devil King, so her armor was all scratched up and damaged in places. And it was true that she had seen not a single knight in armor or even a helm during her time here.

“So it *is* the armor...”

Really, as long as she bore the Cloth of the Dispeller—the symbol of her power as a Hero—no full-body armor was necessary at all. But, perhaps due to the limits of her holy-energy coffers, she could never deploy both her holy sword and the Cloth at its maximum force simultaneously. Even if she was protected against the Devil King’s attack, it meant little if she couldn’t strike back. Thus, before the final battle, Emilia had thought it best not to use the Cloth and poured all her energy into her sword instead.

“...I don’t smell strange or something, do I?”

The thought consumed her once it popped up in her mind. She sniffed her long hair. The fact she had engaged in a fierce battle followed by five days without a bath was a reality she preferred not to face as a woman, but Emilia actually had a little trick to deal with that.

“I transformed once yesterday...so that shouldn’t be it.”

It was the angel’s blood within Emilia. Whenever she awoke its presence—an ability she’d never had in her memory, something discovered only when told about it on that fateful day—it *fully* refreshed her. If she were gravely wounded in battle, this angelic transformation would immediately heal it all. If she were hurt in “angel” mode, she would still heal, but gradually over time, and if she left that mode before she was fully healed, her injuries would remain how they were, without getting worse. A transformation was like a deep cleansing for her.

When traveling in lands like the eastmost parts of the Eastern Island, where temperatures and humidity were high and clean streams to bathe in were few and far between, Emilia was the only one among her traveling party who managed to keep herself clean and tidy despite all the fighting they’d waded through. That was the only real difference between Emilia and her three companions—a difference she’d freely taken advantage of in battle during their quest, and one that fellow female traveler Emeralda Etuva hadn’t hidden her envy of. However, transforming also required a substantial amount of holy energy—and, of course, it didn’t “cleanse” anything she was wearing.

“Maybe it’s that...?”

Emilia blushed, even though nobody was watching her. If her appearance stuck out like this in a rich, peaceful country, it wasn’t just a little embarrassing—it would lead to all sorts of inconveniences, a fact she had already learned through hard experience.

“Someplace I can wash my clothing... I could hardly use the water fountains in the public squares. With all the people out at night, Light Mirror might still make me conspicuous...and besides, just because they can’t see me, it’s not like I can go...naked, like that...”

Her thought process quickly took her *there*, but either way, she had few leads

when it came to doing laundry. Something about that might be written on that woman's maps, but she couldn't do much as long as she was illiterate.

Just when she was thinking it was time to turn to her final resort:

"...What's that sound?"

There was a repetitive, heavy sound, beating out a rhythm from somewhere, almost like a large insect in flight. It seemed to be coming from the dwelling she had left. Emilia peeked back into the room from the hallway.

"That board again..."

The board, which emitted all that light a moment ago, was now flashing and lightly vibrating across the floor.

"Wh-what...?"

She reluctantly approached it, preparing herself for anything and wondering if it would leap up at her as she peered into the screen. Now, where she had seen the bear drawing earlier, there was a red-and-green rectangular shape. She stared at it, unable to figure out its meaning, and after a few moments the vibration stopped and the picture went back to the bear.

"Wha, wha, what was all that about...? Agh!"

It promptly began to shake again. This time, though, it didn't seem interested in stopping. After a minute of this, Emilia finally drummed up the courage to pick it up.

The board was dully vibrating in her hand, but it didn't seem about to do anything harmful. That red-and-green rectangle was on the surface of it again, and inside was another figure that was new to her.

"What kind of thing is this...? Eek!"

When she was brave enough to try poking it, the vibration stopped, and the picture on the board's surface changed again. Emilia dropped it on the floor with a heavy thud, and silence returned once again.

"Wha...wha...wha...?"

Then, another shocking change.

<“H-hello... Hello?”>

“?!”

It was a voice. A person’s voice, coming from that board! It was patchy, with some noise that Emilia had never heard before, but was it that woman’s voice? She looked around the room, but detected nobody nearby. Perhaps it was a magical talisman of sorts, taking the role of the Idea Link in long-distance communication.

<“Did, did someone pick up? Hello? Helloooooo?”>

“The voice makes it through...which means...”

Emilia had conversed via Idea Link often on her journey. If someone was there, on the other side of this board, then perhaps...!

“Maybe I can use...Idea Link?”

It was her first chance to have a calm conversation with a human being in this country. This time, for sure, she couldn’t afford to scare her...and this was the only way.

Slowly, silently, Emilia focused on the board lying on the floor. Her mind connected to it, much more easily than she’d predicted.

And it *was* that woman. She sat down next to the lit-up board, working the Idea Link to read the words and consciousness of the woman, and then she began to speak.

<“Um... Hello?”>

This must be how people greeted each other in long-distance discussions.

<“Hello? Oh, did this work?! M-maybe I dropped my phone somewhere away from my purse! Hello?!”>

Phone?

There was no common concept of a “phone” shared between the two minds. Emilia was unable to discern its meaning.

<“Phone...”>

<“Y-yeah. Um... I’m the owner of that phone. I’m at the police station right by

the station in Eifukucho.”>

A “police station” was likely one of the constabulary’s guardrooms. Quickly, Emilia opened up the blue map and checked it against the concepts beamed into her mind. A “station” would be a stopping point for transportation, so Emilia soon had a general idea of where it was. It didn’t look that far away from her.

<“So, um...yeah...?”>

<“Oh, ohhh, how, ya doing?”>

<“Huh? Um, I’m all right...”>

<“What, is, your name?”>

She still wasn’t fully picking up on the concepts. The Idea Link only worked if there were common ideas to link up with. And in order to pull out as much of this woman’s words and ideas as possible, Emilia felt it best to use the language she was most familiar with.

<“Um? My name is, uh, Keiko Yusa.”>

<“Yusa?”>

<“Y-yes. First name K-E-I-K-O, last name Y-U-S-A.”>

<“Keiko...Yusa...”>

She finally had her name. The name “Yusa,” along with the characters used to write it, undoubtedly belonged to her. She wasn’t quite sure how kay-ee-ai-kay-oh led to “Keiko” yet, but at least she knew how to read it now. Now she was getting excited.

<“Your, belongings...are, here.”>

<“What?”>

The voice on the other side of the Idea Link stiffened at Emilia’s response. Learning Yusa’s name had taken so much effort that she must have done something wrong. In a panic, Emilia strung some more words together.

<“Welcome...in the room...come here.”>

<“...Nnnnn, nnnnnh!”>

“Huh? What?!”

Without warning, the conversation and Idea Link were cut off. She knew what that meant. Disconnections like this were common if your partner fell asleep, or was knocked unconscious. As if picking up on this, the light-up board’s surface returned to the picture of that bear.

Had she done something to scare her again? Picking up your partner’s language while conducting a long-distance Idea Link required pretty intense mental concentration. If she could meet her in person and return her items, that wouldn’t just allow her to apologize in person—it’d make it far easier to keep that link going. Plus, she was sure she hadn’t said anything *wrong*, per se, in this country’s language.

“...Hopefully this will work...”

As long as she didn’t know Yusa’s location, she would just need to have her come here. And as long as Emilia didn’t know how this board worked, exactly, she couldn’t send out an Idea Link from her end.

“Guess I’ll just have to wait.”

Yusa had already been here twice. Someone not involved with this building, one with so many rooms, wouldn’t show up at this one twice without any business. Next time, Emilia wanted to greet her properly and apologize for everything that happened. It might lead to more constables chasing after her, but she’d deal with that then. Despite the short length of her conversation with this Keiko Yusa, it had borne a lot of fruit. If she could build on that, the next time a constable confronted her, she’d at least be able to talk back.

“Thinking about it that way...this armor really *is* a bad idea.”

Now she knew what “samoorai gosst” meant. It certainly described her to a T. Determining that much from a single glance indicated Yusa was a perceptive woman, yes, but if Emilia wanted to stop looking like a hostile threat to her, she’d better have that armor off at their next encounter.

But if she did...

“Oof.”

Just as she began removing a shoulder guard, she was greeted by what could be called a *sour* odor.

“I gotta wash this... No way she’ll ever listen to me like this... Oh! That’s right!”

In the midst of their talk, Emilia learned that those white and blue maps took up a vital position in Keiko Yusa’s life. That, and the “Yu” part of her name, which could also be read as “hot water,” was used to represent things like baths and hot springs.

Staring at the map full of unfamiliar characters, it only took a few seconds before she sounded her first whoop of joy in this nation.

“Yes! Here we go!”

“...I feel like a new girl...”

For the first time in five days, Emilia felt healthy, mind and body, in this new world. The clothing and underwear that had absorbed so much sweat under her armor during that intense fighting now had the fetching smell of soap to them.

There was a public bath not far from that building. She wasn’t aware of what the “public” part meant until she arrived at the door, but as she eavesdropped on the conversations of people around her, she realized it meant a bath open for anyone to use.

Public baths like these, even on alternate worlds, didn’t vary much design-wise—but since she didn’t want to break any taboos, Emilia immediately went up to what seemed to be the attendant, a middle-aged woman. It was true—being able to calmly use the Idea Link in person with someone made it possible to grasp concepts in such incredible depth. The attendant certainly knew that she was a foreigner without much language skill, but she was still polite with her, choosing her words carefully to guide her through the process. A lot of it was still way over Emilia’s head, but it still helped build her vocabulary greatly.

The problem was with the currency Emilia brought along. She had already sworn not to touch Keiko Yusa’s money. On her way to the final battle, she’d tucked a sort of charm under her armor—a cloth bag with one gold, one silver, and one copper coin, a symbol of her intention to return to a peaceful, bountiful world—and she finally opened it here, presenting the most valuable

gold coin to the attendant. This seemed to do little but thoroughly confuse the woman, but Emilia received a lifeline from an unexpected source.

<“Hohh... That’s a rare coin, there.”>

Behind her was an old woman wearing a pair of glasses.

<“Rare, you say?”>

<“Here, let me see it a moment.”>

<“Okay. Go ahead.”>

Taking a small eyepiece like something a watch repairman would use out of her pocket, she ran her eye up and down the gold piece.

<“Hmm... It’s certainly nothing used in modern Japan. Or anywhere in the world, really. I haven’t seen markings like these before...but from what I can tell, it’s definitely real gold.”>

The attendant shrugged at the old woman. <“But, Ms. Kimura, I can’t really do anything with real gold here!”>

<“If you’d like,”> Ms. Kimura said without addressing this complaint, <“I could buy this from you. In fact, I could cover you for the bath here. Once you’re done, come on over to my store. I’ll give it a full evaluation and pay you in yen for it.”>

Emilia didn’t quite catch all of that, but she got the idea that this old woman she’d run into would exchange this coin for the local currency. Thanks to old lady Kimura, Emilia finally managed to enter the bath. She was even nice enough to explain how to use all the in-house equipment.

Shedding the armor really made it *this* easy for people to approach her? That was the biggest shock for Emilia. She was highly reluctant to disarm and disrobe, given that she had no idea when Satan, the Devil King, would strike—but in a way, all that equipment was serving as two strikes against her around here.

As she experimented with all these things she’d never experienced before—washing her hair with liquid soap that bubbled an unbelievable amount; faucets that provided cold or hot water *whenever you wanted it*; tubes in the wall that

blew hot air at you; a large, well-polished full-length mirror—she took the first real bath she'd had in she couldn't say how many days.

Ms. Kimura also told her about the washing device adjacent to the bath. <“I like your courage, living in Japan by yourself with a single set of clothes, but I can't say it's a good idea. How 'bout I buy some things for you and take it off the price for the gold?”>

Looking a little concerned for Emilia, Ms. Kimura went to a vending machine in the changing room and purchased a set of undergarments like none Emilia had ever seen. Putting them on, she waited (otherwise unclothed) in front of the washing device for twenty minutes. Her long-sleeved hemp shirt and pants came out soon after, smelling of soap and dried to a crisp.

<“Don't tell me you come from a country where they don't have washing machines?”>

Ms. Kimura laughed as the dumbfounded Emilia stared at the results.

Stopping herself before she aroused suspicion, Emilia put the clothing on and walked with the old woman to her shop. It had a sign with the words for WATCHES / ANTIQUES / PRECIOUS METALS on it, she could tell now. Inside, Ms. Kimura placed the coin in a strange box and looked through a pair of tubes to examine it.

<“Hmmm... It resembles some of the old currency of Spain, but this is much purer gold than anything they minted. How about fifty...no, seventy thousand yen?”>

Seventy thousand. Emilia wasn't sure how large a number that was, but she could still tell that Ms. Kimura had “raised” the offer from fifty. When she nodded, the old woman gave her a fishy sort of smile and handed her seven familiar-looking bills.

<“Thank ya much! Lemme know if you ever need any more help.”>

Having run her Idea Link the whole time, Emilia suddenly realized at that moment that Ms. Kimura was one hell of a shrewd businesswoman.

<“Thank ya much.”>

She assumed that was meant to celebrate a successful transaction. To that

woman, though, seventy thousand was probably a pittance. She intended to sell it for much higher to someone else, no doubt. Plus—although Emilia didn't know this at the time—selling precious metals like this usually involved a lot of detailed paperwork and record-keeping, but she was never presented with any of that. But that was fine. She wasn't planning to stay in this nation for long, and the conversation had helped add to her vocabulary.

More than anything, though, seventy thousand yen would be enough to live in this country for the time being. And with this amount of language skill built up, she ought to be able to apologize to Keiko Yusa by now. Food, bathing, washing—none of it would be a problem from now on.

Of course, none of this truly solved anything. She had a bag to return and an apology to make, yet she had made no progress at all in her quest to find Satan and slay him. The complete lack of any demonic force everywhere she went was, in a way, unnerving. What were the Devil King and his cohort Alciel doing, hiding themselves in such complete fashion?

“Could there be humans sheltering them...? No. There couldn't be.”

Satan may have been wounded, but there weren't many human beings who could be exposed to the Devil King's full force and escape alive. Perhaps they were in the same world, but in some faraway, remote locale.

“Maybe I better find a way to gain a broader knowledge of this world.”

And maybe she would be staying here for longer than she'd expected. It was a somber thought she was turning over in her mind when something else hit her.

“Wh-wha...? That smell!!”

Just as she took her first step from Ms. Kimura's shop in the direction of that dwelling she'd shamelessly broken into, she encountered an aroma that drove her appetite into a frenzy. It smelled a bit spicy, but the moment her nostrils picked up on it, her stomach—which had consumed nothing but water these past few days—growled furiously.

“What...? That aroma... Where is it...?”

Her legs were driven forward by it until they came to a halt in front of a building. A restaurant, it would seem. It had an exhaust fan in the wall that

blasted out air that seemed specially designed to tempt your taste buds. The large window out front had a display of food dishes, although further inspection revealed they weren't real but rather expertly made models, some even featuring chopsticks floating in the air as they picked up noodles and spoons ladling some manner of cooked or boiled grain. The numbers below them must be the prices. She looked at her money again.

"W-well, looks like I have enough!"

She couldn't hold back any longer. Her body craved *real* food. Not the kind of slop designed just to weigh down your stomach, but actual cuisine, prepared by a well-trained, diligent chef, guaranteed to make your whole digestive system happy.

<"Chinese food...' Mm. Chinese food.> ...Off we go!"

In grand spirits, she slid the glass door open.

<"Hello and welcome!">

A now-quite familiar phrase was shouted out across the space. Emilia wouldn't leave for almost another two hours.

After the whirlwind of new sensations she experienced in that Chinese restaurant, she returned "home" to that building. Yes, in the midst of that outing, she had learned it was called an "apartment." With the money she had, she should've been searching for some kind of lodging, but she marched straight over there anyway.

She had illegally snuck into Room 501 of the Urban Heights Eifukucho building. The window was unlocked as it had been before her first arrival, Keiko Yusa's bag and property right where Emilia left them. Despite the twinge of guilt she felt about it—being a repeat offender now, treating this like it was her own domicile—she had decided to sleep here again today.

"Funny, though," she said as she looked around the apartment. Compared to the bathhouse, Kimura's precious-metal shop, and the Chinese restaurant, this building was clearly a recent construct. Why was such a new and large-scale housing complex so barren of people? She browsed around the building a bit before reaching her room, but none of the structure was incomplete, or had

been torn apart, or whatever. This allowed Emilia two free nights of lodging and the freedom to use her newfound money elsewhere, so she had nothing to complain about, but it still made her wonder.

Plus, she still had no idea who Keiko Yusa really was. Along those lines, maybe she should have talked over matters with Ms. Kimura some more. There would be no letting her guard down around her, though. Emilia appreciated her help with the bath and the gold coin, but that old lady had easily seen that she was a suspicious, likely homeless woman from a very strange land. Emilia was here to slay the Devil King; she had no intention or need to interact with this country's people very deeply, and if it really *was* as peaceful as it felt, then she didn't need to get involved anyway.

This implied that she couldn't get too chummy with Keiko Yusa, either, but she still had a valid reason to contact her—to apologize for threatening her, and to give back what she'd unintentionally borrowed from her.

"It'd be nice if I knew a little more about this place, but...hmm..."

Ample shelter; clean bathing facilities; delicious food. Fully satisfied, body and soul, for the first time in a while, Emilia sprawled on the floor, stretched out, and closed her eyes. She had been surprised this morning, but no matter how deeply she slept tonight, there was no way she'd fail to notice someone approaching.

The darkness behind her eyelids conjured up assorted memories of her time here. The shock upon falling into this world bathed in light, its gigantic stone towers pressed against one another. The first time a constable barked at her, nearly capturing her before she could flee. The time she spent jumping from stone tower to stone tower—they were apparently called "skyscrapers"—in an attempt to get out of a driving rain, yet unable to enter any of them. The three days she spent in a city park, drinking the free water—and the constable who discovered her on day three, ensuring she could never go back. That time she was so hungry she'd entered a shop attempting to buy something with her gold and silver coin, only for the language barrier to turn things into a dispute that sent the constables after her again.

Over the past few days, the only food she'd had was some bread crusts

handed out in front of a bakery (still delicious enough to be a rarity over in Ente Isla) and a bland paste of some sort made of what seemed like boiled, strained beans, passed out at a shop selling these white, soft-looking square lumps of something (it was filling, at least). And in the end, she was right back here, squatting in this empty room.

“I haven’t been too lucky here so far, have I...?”

The memories were more wretched than she’d thought. Emilia found herself lying facedown, holding back the tears. The apartment would’ve been a godsend even if she had been forced to sleep on the balcony, but she’d made it in here solely because someone accidentally forgot to lock a window. That allowed her to learn more about this nation, but it was strictly a series of lucky breaks strung together.

Back on Ente Isla, even if separated from her friends in an unfamiliar land, she would never be totally unable to communicate with them, not with the powers she enjoyed. They were generally welcome wherever they went as the noble band who’d struck down the Great Demon General Lucifer—and if not, the experience (or rank) of at least one of her friends would usually save Emilia from much pain.

She could see that now. On the Western Island, where the Church’s influence was its most powerful, you couldn’t find anyone who didn’t know Olba Meiyer, one of the six archbishops who held the most decision-making power in the whole Church infrastructure. And in lands without such cozy relationships with the Church, the name of Emeralda Etuva, the great sorcerer of the courts of Saint Aile, held massive sway. Beyond the Western Island, meanwhile, the extensive connections Albert Ende seemed to have worldwide had saved everyone’s hide at least a few times.

“Olba... Eme... Al...”

Emilia softly called the names of her companions—strong, gentle, worth relying on and leaving one’s life to. They were precious to her—but now, there was nobody.

“I miss you...”

With a light sigh and a single tear running down her cheek, she found herself

asleep before she realized it.

“...Huh?”

When Emilia woke up, it was to sense something strange drawing near—a large number of people.

She sprang to her feet, opened the door, and looked down at the floors below from the corridor. She saw nearly ten men dressed in blue-and-gray outfits, hanging out in front of the building’s entrance. A vehicle was stopped on the road in front, carrying a large, metallic box of some sort.

“What’s that?”

And that woman was among them. Keiko Yusa.

Disturbed, Emilia returned to her room. Things were different from before. The men with her didn’t look like constables, but Keiko Yusa might’ve enlisted these reinforcements to defeat her.

“...I may not be able to stay here any longer.”

She had hoped to meet her and apologize directly, but that was no longer on the table. So she placed Keiko Yusa’s bag on the doorstep—having placed everything back inside the previous night—put her armor back on, gave one final, longing look at the apartment, and then opened the window and flew off.



“I’m not lying! I saw a ghost! I’m telling you, we need to hire a priest to purify every room in the place to make sure it doesn’t come back!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I told you, stop spouting off about stuff like that in front of the furniture people!”

“But I *saw* it...”

“Enough! You know what kind of situation Urban Heights Eifukucho is in! It’s already do-or-die occupancy-wise, and now you’ve got the police involved over some spooky ghost or whatever? What if people start spreading weird rumors again?”

“B-but...we’ve gotten reports from other companies around here about strange sightings even before I showed up...”

“Ughh! Look, just open all the zero-one rooms up to the fifth floor!”

“All of them?! But it was in Room 501! I saw it there!”

“For real...?”

A man and a woman were bickering with each other in the front lobby of Urban Heights Eifukucho. One was Keiko Yusa, the woman Emilia ran into, and the other was her boss, Kazumura. In front of them, a team of workmen from the furniture company looked over assorted papers, checking on their upcoming work assignments.

“All right! Is it okay to get started?”

“See? They’re calling for us! Unlock those doors already! ...Yeah, we’ll open them up now, guys! ...All right? Come on!”

Her boss flashed a beaming smile to the workmen, then grimaced menacingly at Keiko.

“I have to get back to the office by three PM, and I better see some work done when I’m back, or else *you’re* gonna have to do all of it.”

“A-all right. I—I’ll do it...”

The half-tearful Keiko headed for the stairs, a unique-looking key in her hand. The workmen needed the elevator, so—in her new, heelless pumps—she climbed up the stairs as she griped to herself.

“Nnngh... Why did I ever have to be involved with this building...?”

Keiko worked for Ohmura Urban Community Real Estate, Ltd., and in the history of that company, they had never had to deal with a more cursed apartment building.

Even as the luxury-condo scene around greater Tokyo had fallen off in the past five years, Urban Community had been enjoying steady growth. The dizzying number of high-rise apartments built along the coast of Tokyo Bay was an indicator of just how intense the competition had become among real estate firms, but that competition had grown just as fierce in some of the budding new hubs of the city. In particular, the prices for properties and rentals along streets in metro Tokyo that allowed easy access to the big rail stations—Ikebukuro,

Shinjuku, Shibuya, Meguro, Osaki, Shinagawa, Ueno, and Tokyo Station itself—were consistently on the rise. The key to success wasn't being right next to these sites, but within maybe a few stations of them along the Japan Rail, private railway, or subway lines.

From the seventies to the turn of the millennium, developers had avoided the expensive downtown area and focused on satellite cities in the neighboring prefectures of Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa, creating what was called a “donut effect” in population growth. Now, however, with more people craving life in the city proper, a similar effect was being seen around the terminal stations of Tokyo's busiest rail lines.

In the midst of all this, Urban Heights—built in Eifukucho, the perfect neighborhood to aim for this kind of customer demand—was a make-or-break project for the company, one that should've been a guaranteed success. The Eifukucho station on the Keio Inokashira line was an express stop, providing easy access to the big population centers around Shibuya, Kichijoji, and Shinjuku. Several bus lines also had their routes start and end at the Keio office in Eifukucho, making travel to other areas around Tokyo a snap. Eifukucho Station had a midsized shopping complex and a large street lined with stores nearby, but much of it was still quiet and filled with quaint old buildings. The region offered relaxation, convenience, and great views of the Tokyo skyline.

Urban Heights, however, was a zombie of a building. Three years old, and its occupancy rate was still zero percent. Not only was it not a success; it hadn't even crossed the starting line yet—and the most aggravating thing was that there was absolutely no reason for it to be a failure.

“And that wasn't even our *fault*, either. Ughh...”

Keiko gave a depressed look toward the ceiling as she opened up Room 401.

The brochures used the slogan “A Futuristic Lifestyle Space for Eifukucho Begins Now!” The project received a major push from Ohmura Group, Urban Community's parent trading firm, and in the space of half a month, over 80 percent of the condos in the upper floors—including the top-floor penthouses—were under contract, with the rental lots in the low-to-mid floors also receiving constant foot traffic.

But just when everyone foresaw the project's success, someone pulled the red carpet out from under them.

It all started with a tiny mistake. Part of the land used to build it on had been declared "Land Containing Buried Cultural Property" by the government. Before any tall structure could be constructed, the spot had to be fully excavated for historical artifacts and the like. This was fairly normal around much of Tokyo, as old as the city was, but the company had filed the papers for this excavation fifty-nine days before the start of construction, rather than the required sixty days. This earned them a warning from the ward government that didn't come until months later, by which time construction was almost complete. Urban Community couldn't really do much about this at that point in the project, but an infraction was an infraction.

Thus, before the building was done, there was a movement within the company to conduct a full, firm-wide compliance check, out of anxiety for their future. That's when the real hell began, because that compliance check started an avalanche of findings that went far beyond simple filing errors.

To put it succinctly, Urban Heights Eifukucho was a textbook case of cutting corners at all phases of construction. The construction materials differed from the norm, the numbers in the material estimates were padded to the point that the building didn't have all the structural materials it should have—both serious, company-toppling issues. To that was added fraudulent claims about the building's insulation and earthquake resistance...and to *that* was added several company managers making up nonexistent material orders in order to embezzle from the budget.

It was no longer a crisis that could be kept internally, and since four-fifths of the real estate lots were already signed for, this led to a storm of criticism and lawsuits claiming damages. Stocks for both Urban Community Real Estate and its Ohmura Group parent plummeted. The entire Urban Community board was dismissed. Ohmura Trading, the largest company in the group, even forced one of its company directors to resign, and Keiko Yusa—a freshly hired college graduate back then—couldn't even imagine how many people below that guy got canned.

After weathering that storm in her first year at work, Keiko was now assigned

to the Urban Heights Eifukucho Renewal Project, two years after that firestorm of a building was finally completed. Their task: to sell Urban Heights to homeowners and tenants all over again, from the ground up. It was the Ohmura Group's decision not to sell the building or its land, but to give it a fresh start, restore the public's trust, and drag the site back to what it should've been all along. All the fraudulent reporting was thoroughly investigated, and the company spent three years completely renovating the building.

Even if the project (and the company) had blown it, the neighborhood's inherent attraction hadn't gone away. Urban Community might be unlikely to reach the sales level they'd expected at first with this, but if they could snatch back at least some of the trust they lost, they'd have nothing to complain about.

"Which, I know spreading rumors about ghosts isn't helpful...but I really *saw* it..."

Keiko walked along the corridor, brightly sunlit in the morning, and stopped at the door to Room 501. She nervously gulped. She *had* seen it. A person who disappeared before her eyes. A stench like none she had experienced before. A door that opened by itself. An eerie, halting voice out of nowhere that called for her. A weird ball of light floating in the air—and then the armored figure looming there.

"Ughhh, I don't want to go in..."

She was already about to cry before anything even happened, but she couldn't anger her boss any longer. That ghost was the rock; Kazumura was the hard place. Life couldn't be more unfair for her.

That being said, though, Kazumura and the company were fighting for their lives. The fortunes of the whole outfit were riding on Urban Heights Eifukucho in a way they hadn't before, and Keiko had worked hard to launch the building's PR blast for potential clients, a project slated to begin today. She couldn't freeze up here.

"There's no such thing as ghosts, there's no such thing as ghosts, ghosts go *away!*"

Recalling all that hard toil (and the fact it was morning), she finally managed

to undo the lock and open the door to Room 501.

“.....!”

Nothing was there. No weird smell, and certainly no wisps or armored samurai.

“Whewwww...”

Keiko huffed out all the breath she had been holding. All that pushing herself must’ve made her see things after all. She repeated that to herself as she carefully edged into the room.

“Ah! My bag!!”

Right in the middle of the room was her purse.

She hadn’t even noticed it was missing until she’d fled to the police station after freaking out over that ghostly voice. It was full of valuable work materials, and she knew it was in here, but there was no way she could’ve come back to fetch it last night.

Rushing into the room, she quickly investigated the bag’s contents.

“Oh, thank heavens! I *knew* it was in here. I think everything’s intact, too... Huh?”

Quickly, she noticed something unusual.

“...Huhh?”

She turned back toward the front door she had just unlocked, the one she’d fled through after that ghostly experience last night. She knew it was locked—but the bag had been left inside a locked room?

“Um... Wow. That’s...weird...?”

So was that not a ghost at all? Was it some criminal who had snuck inside? But if it was, that made no sense at all. How would any trespasser make it inside this room, and how would they lock the door from the inside before leaving? This was the *fifth floor*. There were no fire escapes or piping on the outer walls of the building, preventing anyone from shimmying up where they didn’t belong, and the emergency escape ladders were designed to be inaccessible

from lower floors.

“...!”

Running over to the balcony, Keiko realized the window was unlocked—but Room 501’s emergency ladder hadn’t been deployed.

“Who...Who placed my purse in this room?”

If someone was here, how did they get in, and how did they get out?

“Are they still here, somewhere?”

Reassured by the presence of her boss and the workmen down below, Keiko looked around the place. There were no signs of activity in the toilet, the bathroom, or the closets. Perhaps the next balcony over...?

“Nothing.”

In case of evacuation, Urban Heights Eifukucho was structured so that people had access to the adjacent balcony, even if it belonged to someone else. Beyond that balcony was a flat, unscalable wall for a good ten feet or so, far too long to jump across.

“H-how...?”

She reached into a purse pocket to inform Kazumura down below that it was okay to open all the apartments.

“...Huh?”

Then she gasped, realizing that something which should’ve been there wasn’t.

“Nnnnnh!!”

Not far away, along an empty street, Emilia held her head in her hands. That mysterious light-up board was within them.

“I accidentally brought it with me...”



The evening sun made Urban Heights Eifukucho cast a long shadow over the city. Keiko made an odd face at it as she pointed her DSLR camera. Right now, she was the only one in the apartment. Her boss, and the workmen who

brought in the furniture, had left long ago, but Keiko's job was just beginning.

Her task here was to wait until the sun set, then take night pictures of the interiors of all the zero-one rooms between floors one and five. They'd use her best shots in the advertising materials the company was working on. This would normally be the job of a PR firm or a professional photographer, but the Urban Heights Eifukucho Renewal Project was strictly limited to handling almost all of its sales work with in-house staff, except for things that couldn't be done without outsourcing. The bosses said they had to, in order to manage compliance, save money, and restore the public's trust all at once, but to the staff it felt like juggling multiple jobs, making for an extremely inefficient operation.

Someone like Keiko, used to her job but still treated as the "new girl" in her office, was perfect for handling something like this. Normally, she'd just shrug it off as an unfortunate side effect of her company's situation, but tonight was different. *Something* was in this apartment—maybe a ghost, maybe a squatter, but either way, a specter that had made Keiko experience a lot of terror over the past couple days.

Already, she had found her purse in a room it should never have been in. That ghostly voice wasn't around, but she had just bought a new smartphone and it was missing from her bag, which did nothing to comfort her. Two days had passed since she had lost it, but she had been so busy in the meantime that she hadn't made it over to a shop to disable it. The company provided her a phone for work purposes, so she wasn't particularly inconvenienced, but she wound up using her personal phone on the job fairly often as well, which only added to the stress.

Plus, when she tried calling it last night, it was answered by some weirdo mystery person. It could've been the same voice that she'd heard in the building...or maybe it wasn't. It was so far away from the receiver that she couldn't tell for sure, and either way, the terror of it all made her black out, so her memory wasn't too clear on it.

"Once it's dark, let's just take these pics and get the heck out of here!"

With that statement—half-yelled in an attempt to banish those bad memories

—Keiko reviewed the vantage points she'd scoped out beforehand and adjusted the camera for night shooting.

"Hmm... This light's in the way. Maybe I should move it."

Each of the apartments was now filled with a selection of well-coordinated furniture, picked out by the company Keiko and her boss worked with. Room 201 would be their model apartment for families, Room 501 the one for single dwellers, and they would remain open for public viewing after tonight.

"I definitely need to try to get some of the kitchen in these. The faucets are all from this year's lineups."

She was still the company newbie, but as someone with three years' experience, she did have her pride and knowledge to work with. Once she threw the switch, her mind was firmly in work mode, forgetting everything else.

Soon, things grew darker outside. Keiko went around the apartment, turning on the lights and getting everything ready.

Then it happened. A knock, from outside Room 501.

"—?!"

Keiko almost dropped the camera she was holding. Who could it be—her boss, or someone else from the office? Or had the workmen forgotten something? Either way, wouldn't they just open the door with their master key?

She froze in place. Another knock. Then she remembered that the door wasn't locked at all. The master key didn't play into it. Anyone affiliated with the company would've just walked right in.

"Wh—who is it...?"

Silently, Keiko tiptoed toward the intercom in the living room (video monitor included) and turned it on.

"...?"

The high-resolution, wide-angle camera view showed a woman with long hair she had never seen before. She was wearing a simple, rough-looking shirt and pants, a very large garbage bag at her feet, and she looked a little out of sorts as her head swiveled around.

She was no ghost, at least. Keiko was relieved about that. Her choice of clothing was a little odd, but maybe she was someone from the rental-furniture company bringing over something they forgot about? That would explain why she hadn't just rung the doorbell on the intercom—she knew this apartment wasn't occupied by any residents.

Keiko's heart still accelerated as she gathered her breath and spoke into the intercom.

"Oh, sorry, I'll be right over!"

The woman on the other side started frantically looking around as if she'd lost her mind. She must've been startled, after Keiko took so long to reply. That was about all the thought she gave to it as she opened the door...

"Um?"

...and immediately froze once more. The woman was gone. All she saw there was that garbage bag.

"...Huh?"

Keiko looked toward one end of the corridor, then the other. Not a soul was in sight. It couldn't have been ten seconds between speaking into the intercom and opening the door. Could someone vanish off the face of the earth like that within ten seconds?

"What's this?" Keiko whispered. Still trying to comprehend the situation, she took a step out the door and wound up kicking the bag by accident.

"Whoa..."

There was something weirdly solid inside. She opened it up to see what was inside.

"A-armor?! I, ah...!!"

She instinctively jumped back and fell on her rear end. There was no mistaking this—it was a set of European-style battle armor. Maybe not the samurai design she thought she saw earlier, but still enough to remind Keiko of that frightful night spirit.

"What...What could this possibly be *about*?!"

No matter how much time passed, or how much she rubbed her eyes, the armor inside the garbage bag never went away. It paralyzed her, robbing her of the ability to move.

Emilia, meanwhile, had been keeping watch over the apartment building, waiting for the chance to hand that light-up board to her. Keiko Yusa showed no sign of leaving, even after all the men did, so she figured she'd learn where the woman was if she waited her out.

The lights in the room happened to be on, so Emilia swiftly leaped up there and knocked on the door. But the response came not from the room, but from a voice that seemed to erupt out of thin air, making her erroneously believe that Keiko Yusa had a soldier set an ambush for her. So she hid, beyond the corridor—in other words, stuck to the outer wall of the apartment building.

However, as she continued to hide, there were no signs of reinforcements. The only person she could detect in the vicinity was Keiko Yusa herself. What was the meaning of this? She held her breath as the silence continued.

<“...Wehhhhh...”>

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Emilia's eyes shot open as she heard the sound of Keiko Yusa crying.

<“I—I can't take this... What is going *onnnnn*? I, what did I even...? Aahhh...”>

“Huh? Huh?”

<“I didn't do anything *wrong*... It's all those construction people who cheaped out on this project! Why do I have to deal with all of this?!”>

Emilia, body still pressed against the wall, was bewildered.

<“It all happened years ago! Why do I have to be yelled at about it? Why do I have to work all this overtime and deal with all these scary things...? I can't stand it!”>

Now Emilia was struck with a sense of guilt like none before. She had come to apologize—so what was she doing here, making her cry instead? She didn't quite understand much of what Keiko Yusa was howling about right now, but it

was clear that Emilia's behavior had scared the wits out of her.

So—this time, for sure—she decided to finally come out and apologize to her face.

<“U-um, I, I’m sorry if I surprised—”>

<“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!”>

As to be expected, Keiko Yusa screamed at the top of her lungs, tossed away her company-issued camera, and fled into the apartment.



“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!”

With an ear-piercing scream, Keiko all but tumbled back into the apartment.

There wasn't any place for a person to stand on outside the corridor's guardrail, but then that woman just appeared out from nowhere. Only a ghost could pull a feat like that off. After the eerie events of the past few days, it'd be impossible *not* to lose one's head.

“Stay away, stay away, aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!”

“Um, um, please, wait! I am not a suspicious person!”

If this didn't count as “suspicious,” what a wondrously peaceful world this would be.

“Die, evil spirit! Die, evil spirit!”

“E-evil spirit...? I am only a...”

“Aahhh, nooooo! Help! Somebody, help meeeeeeeeeee!!”

“.....XXXX! XXXX!!”

“Hffph!”

At that moment, Keiko was surrounded by a warm pocket of air.



<“Die, evil spirit! Die, evil spirit!”>

<“E-evil spirit...? I am only a...”>

<“Aahhh, nooooo! Help! Somebody, help meeeeeeeeeee!!”>

“.....Ugh, enough of this! Please, just listen to me!!”

Approaching the screaming, balled-up Keiko Yusa on the floor, Emilia tapped a finger against her forehead.

“Link!”

<“Hffph!”>

She threw an Idea Link wave toward her—and at that moment, Emilia’s and Keiko’s minds were connected.

“...Can you understand me?”

“Y-yes,” Keiko Yusa groggily replied. Her eyes, unfocused by the terror, gradually began to come back together, and the moment they met Emilia’s:

“Who...are you?”

“...It’s a long story, but I—”

“Are you the ghost of some employee who was fired after taking the blame for this apartment getting messed up?”

“—came from another world to... Excuse me?”

Emilia scowled a bit, faced with the reality that she was still assumed to be a vengeful spirit of some sort. The concept of “ghosts” differed between Ente Isla and Japan, but they were both generally seen as spirits of the dead, wandering the world.

“Another world... You mean the afterlife?”

The “afterlife” seemed to mean what the Church referred to as heaven. A place where the souls of the dead were guided to, perhaps?

“Um, not exactly...but anyway, I wanted to see you once, so I could apologize to you.”

“Apologize...?”

“Listen, I’m really sorry that I snuck in here and scared you. I didn’t mean anything bad. I just don’t know the rules of this world very well yet.”

“Are you...human?”

“Yes. I’m not a ghost or—”

“Even though you went invisible and floated in the air on the other side of that guardrail?”

“Um, that’s easy if you have holy magic... This world doesn’t have any of that?”

Emilia thought for a moment, then decided to cast a form of holy magic that hopefully wouldn’t agitate her much.

“I mean, like, this kind of floating in the air...?”

“I’m dreaming, I’m dreaming, this is a dream, it has to be, I know it, it has to be, there are lots of ghosts that go around looking like regular people, it’s a dream, a dream, a dream...”

“Sorry. I won’t ask any more weird questions, all right?”

All she did was lift herself up a few inches, and *that* was the reaction. If she started shooting illumination orbs or beams of fire, she’d have no excuse if Keiko Yusa died of shock.

“So, today, I wanted to return this to you.”

“A dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream...”

“Um, hey.”

“Ah, yes, huh? Ahhh! My phone!!”

The sight of her smartphone made Keiko’s eyes almost burst out of her head.

“Oh, is this a...phone?” Emilia gave the light-up board back to her. Keiko immediately began to furtively scrutinize it, whispering, “I hope nothing weird’s happened to it” under her breath.

“What kind of tool is that?”

Keiko stopped in her tracks. “Are you from some era before phones?”

“Huh?”

Emilia raised an eyebrow at this, but quickly picked up on what Keiko was

trying to ask.

“Listen, I’m hoping you could do away with the impression that I’m a ghost from ancient times...”

“They say that ghosts don’t realize they’re dead, you know.”

“I am *not* a ghost, all right? Just think of me as a foreigner in Japan for the first time!”

“A foreigner who speaks Japanese *that* well?”

“No, this is holy magic that’s... Ughh! This is so frustrating!”

Emilia put a hand to her head, but at least this made it clear that Keiko had no understanding (or concept) of holy magic. If it didn’t exist, though, it meant that pretty much none of the cultural background built up in Emilia’s mind would work here.

“Anyway! I’ve been wanting to apologize to you for a while now! For scaring you so many times, and coming into this room without your permission!”

“Y-yeah, that! You said you came into this room, but, but if you aren’t a ghost, how did you get inside?!”

“Didn’t you see me?! I used my flight magic to come up, I was trying to get some rest on the balcony over there, and the window happened to be open!”

The language this woman was speaking continued to build up inside Emilia’s mind, but none of it was getting at the things she really wanted to know about this country. It was easier to obtain concepts from her than Ms. Kimura, but it looked like she’d have to press her a little further to reach any conclusions. If she interacted with her for too long, though, it could wind up having too much of an effect on her life. Things didn’t seem too rosy for this exchange, and it cast a pall over Emilia’s mind.



“I am *not* a ghost, all right? Just think of me as a foreigner in Japan for the first time!”

Keiko was surrounded by the strangest sense that something was off.

“A foreigner who speaks Japanese *that* well?”

It had been several minutes since she was confronted by this mysterious woman out of nowhere, but she couldn't shake the impression that the woman's voice was coming from some distant radio, bouncing around the inside of her skull. The voice was definitely making it into her ears, but it felt like its sounds were running counter to its content, as she understood it. But how did she even know that? It just made Keiko more confused.

"No, this is XXXX that's... Ughh! This is so frustrating!"

Plus, her speech was interspersed with words like these she couldn't pick up on at all. When she missed a word, it sounded like static from a poorly tuned stereo. It was the most uncomfortable feeling, there in her mind.

"Anyway! I've been wanting to apologize to you for a while now! For scaring you so many times, and coming into this room without your permission!"

"Y-yeah, that! You said you came into this room, but, but if you aren't a ghost, how did you get inside?!"

"Didn't you see me?! I used my XXXXX to come up, I was trying to get some rest on the balcony over there, and the window happened to be open!"

"But whether it's open or not, how did you climb up five floors just to...!"

It was difficult to glean much information from the woman's words. Her speech sounded familiar enough, but there were moments when Keiko had the strangest impression she was hearing a word for the very first time. It was almost like those last few moments of a dream, when reality mixes with fantasy, except it seemed to go on and on for her.

"Look, anyway, I promise I won't appear in this room again, and I promise I won't cause you any more trouble!"

"Umm..."

"And...before I go, let me ask you one more time... I mean, about something I want to know about..."

"Yes?"

Keiko had a lot of questions herself for the woman, but this sense of imbalance in her mind was growing more and more intense. She had trouble

collecting her thoughts.

“What kind of tool is that ‘phone’ of yours? I heard your voice from that phone yesterday, but does that let you talk to people far away, like the XX in an XXXX”

Is she asking what a mobile phone is? Is she really serious?

“A phone... Well, this is a smartphone, to be exact...but...”

A smartphone was a type of telephone, one that used high-speed data transfer technology to serve as a kind of palm-top computer device, sold by three big carriers and a multitude of Internet providers in Japan. Purchasing one required going to a phone or mobile-device shop, picking a device and data plan, and either paying for it all at once or dividing it up over several months.

“Huh? What’s this...?”

The smartphone Keiko had bought was a brand-new model from Dokodemo. After her old feature phone broke, she flexed the ol’ wallet muscles a bit and splurged on this one, but she was never that good with computers so a lot of the features were opaque to her at first. Only now was she really coming to grips with the thing.

“W-wait a moment. I didn’t ask for this much...”

Since the contract for her old cell phone was in the name of her father all the way up in Aomori Prefecture, Keiko had to have her family send over documents proving that she was related to them when buying the new phone and sign a new contract in her own name. It all seemed so pointlessly confusing, especially since the last time she bought a phone, she was in high school and needed nothing but an ID for the purchase.

“Wh-what’s going on?! This is so...”

It was only at that point, after three years of working for this company, that it dawned on her that her parents back home were still paying her phone bill. Looking at the family-register documents they had sent over to her made Keiko cry a little—she’d grown up in this little place in Aomori, and now she was employed with the Ohmura Group, a major firm in the big city. Her parents were happy for her, of course, but the news soon broke on this whole Urban

Heights Eifukucho debacle, making her first year at Ohmura a mentally and emotionally trying experience.

Amid all the confusion, Keiko had been thrust into the front lines of work with barely any in-house training and asked to do all kinds of crazy, unreasonable things. Many people who had joined the company with her didn't even make it the whole year. But Keiko made it through, she thought, because back when she lived alone in Tokyo as a college student, she'd had a part-time job at a call center handling Dokodemo customer support, which let her develop a sort of immunity to verbal abuse and unfair questioning.

Once this Urban Heights renewal project was over with, she hoped to get enough time off to go back home again and see her parents for the first time in three years.

"No... I can't take any more...!!"

At that moment—and just for a moment—Emi's consciousness was thrust into darkness.



Keiko's thought process surged like a tidal wave.

"Huh? What's this...?"

All this woman did was ask about this phone, but before Keiko could open her mouth, all these thoughts and memories related to cell phones cascaded out of her, as if their minds were linked up with each other.

"W-wait a moment. I didn't ask for this much..."

Everything up to how Keiko got involved with this apartment building flashed brightly before her, as if the two of them witnessed it all together the whole time.

At the same time, Emilia was exposed to everything—all the information Keiko had needed to learn, to work, to live in this nation called Japan.

"Wh-what's going on?! This is so..."

That unknown middle-aged man must be Keiko's father... Their home in "Aomori" was covered in heavy snow, and his deep, rugged facial features

reminded her of some of the mountain men she knew in Ente Isla's Northern Island. He didn't seem the type of father to say very much, but he had a deep love for Keiko, and Keiko firmly understood that. That's why, even living alone in the big city, she worked hard in her college classes, never taking the easy way out. The part-time work at Dokodemo was punishingly difficult, but the money was good—well, good enough that she didn't ask her family for much support at all while she searched for a job post-graduation.

Once she was done with the work relating to this apartment, she wanted to go see her parents.

“No... I can't take any more...!!”

Emilia screamed as she held her head.

“Link Cancel! ...Hahh!!”

She forced the Idea Link to disconnect.

Keiko took a light breath and closed her eyes, as Emilia panted, eyes wide open and sweat running down her forehead.

“What...What *was* that...? That's never happened in an Idea Link...”

She looked at her trembling palms, shivering at this unbelievable event. It had to be an Idea Link gone out of control. Her head was warm, as if she'd caught a fever; her mind was unfocused, her heart palpitating. The amount of stamina those few minutes had cost her, she realized, was staggering.

“Did my magic...go haywire?”

That was the only thing she could think of. Every spell had a requisite amount of holy magic, and an Idea Link never took much of it to work. It connected two minds, after all; streaming too much holy force into the mix could not only damage the other person but even expose your own brain to danger. But Emilia had never failed to control an Idea Link quite like *this* before. *This* was just blindly reading a person's head, like a spell to force the memories out of a criminal during an interrogation.

Spells involving people's memories were high-level holy magic. Emilia knew about them, but had never fully studied them. About all she could manage were

spells to temporarily seal away a person's memories—and even then, it only worked for very short experiences, on small children traumatized by the calamity of a marauding Devil King's Army. If the target was an adult with a stronger sense of self, she'd have to turn to Emeralda or Olba for that one.

"What's going on? My spell control is...*ngh*..."

Emilia slumped down onto the floor, unable to withstand the sudden dizziness coming over her.

"Why...? Whether it went out of control or not, why did an Idea Link exhaust me so much...?"

Then, remembering she wasn't alone, she looked at Keiko, her eyes closed as she hung her head down. This nation had no concept of holy magic. What would that mean...?

"She...has *no holy force* within her?"

The moment she uttered the words, the terror behind that truth grabbed Emilia by the heart.

Holy force was the vital energy source for spells, a force that enriched the atmosphere in every corner of Ente Isla. Everyone who lived in that land took this energy within themselves, in varying quantities. In this land of Japan, though, there was nothing. No—perhaps nothing *anywhere*, on this planet called Earth.

Everyone took in holy energy in different ways. Even on Ente Isla, it wasn't uncommon to find people unable to wield it. But they all absorbed it regardless, and when their bodies held none of it at all... Well, Emilia didn't know what happened to them then.

"You really have...nothing?"

Emilia took Keiko's hand, ping-pong a tiny wave of holy magic-driven sonar across her body.

<"...Nrah!">

At that moment, Keiko's eyes opened, as if someone had administered smelling salts.

“It’s true. There’s nothing.”

There wasn’t even the tiniest blip of holy force in her body. Her reaction just now was simply the result of Emilia’s holy force starting to build up in her heart.

<“H-huh? Why did I...? Oh, it’s you. The ghost...”>

Emilia understood the term “ghost,” but she still hadn’t accumulated enough of the language to understand even half of what Keiko said without the Idea Link. If she kept the Link going, though, she couldn’t guarantee Keiko’s safety, and she had no idea what might even happen to herself.

Perhaps this world would offer no way for her to replenish her holy force. And until she was sure of that, one way or another, it wasn’t a good idea to stay here for long. Emilia felt it was time.

“Keiko.”

Keiko brought her hands to her ears for a moment before replying.

“H-huh? Um, yes?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been so much trouble for you. But let me promise you, one more time. I will never steal anything from you. I will never abuse the knowledge you gave me, or give it to someone else. And I swear I will never scare you again.”

“Um, okay...”

“You will forget about me, but as a token of my thanks and apology, let me give you my name. I am Emilia Justina—a Hero from another world, and a woman who has just brought calamity upon it.”

“He...ro?”

“Good luck with your work. I’ll be cheering you on... Farewell, and once again, I’m really sorry.”



“Keiko.”

“H-huh? Um, yes?”

Keiko, no longer under the impression that her consciousness was leaving her,

was surprised by the sound of an actual voice hitting her earlobes. That was about all she could subsequently blurt out.

“I’m s-sorry. I’ve been so much trouble for youuu. But let me promise you, one more time. I will never steal anything from youuu. I will never abuuse the knowledge you gave me, or give it to s-someone else. And I swear I will never scare youuu again.”

“Um, okay...”

“You will forget about me, but as a token of my thanks and apology, let me give you my naaame. I am Emilia Justina—a Hero from another world, and a woman who has just brought calamity upon iit.”

“He...ro?”

Keiko blinked. The woman, Emilia, raised her hands, pointing them toward her.

“Good luck with your work. I’ll be cheering youuu on... Farewell, and once again, I’m really sorrrry.”

It felt for a moment like a breeze emanated from Emilia’s palms—

And the next thing she knew, Keiko was in a hospital bed.



One month later, the occupancy rate of Urban Heights Eifukucho, for both condos and rentals, was at about one-fifth. Even one-fifth should’ve been seen as a success, but the general public still hadn’t forgotten what happened, a fact now painfully obvious to all the employees.

Even worse, the...*thing* that happened to Keiko Yusa in that building got leaked and connected to another, unrelated but heavily-reported-upon incident. It led to Urban Heights Eifukucho being brought up by the media yet again, reporting on both this new incident and its past stumbles.

The morning after that fateful night, when Keiko’s coworkers realized she’d never made it back home, they traveled to Urban Heights and found her unconscious inside. She wasn’t in mortal danger, but the fact that an employee from the management company was hospitalized after falling unconscious for

unknown reasons didn't exactly play well with the general public.

This happened to take place following a rash of other mystery fainting spells reported in neighborhoods as varied as Harajuku, Yoyogi, and Hatsudai. The cause was always unknown, and it led to all kinds of irresponsible speculation—gas leaks, terrorism, you name it. Keiko's case only made the speculation grow wilder, and the repeated reports of suspicious people and unexplained phenomena around the sales office handling Urban Heights Eifukucho only worsened matters. Keiko Yusa had been assigned to investigate, but despite her warnings about these repeated incidents, the company did nothing about them—leading to another public outcry, and more calls for stricter compliance checks for Ohmura Urban Community Real Estate.

Even after she was discharged from the hospital, Keiko Yusa couldn't quite dispel the haze from her mind. She remembered a ghost, and being scared, but it was the strangest thing—somehow, she was convinced that she'd never see a ghost again. The thought was inside her, but she had no clue what to make of it.

This rash of fainting spells was already under way by the time she came to, which led to questions from the police and fire departments—but with few memories to work with, she couldn't give them many useful answers.

She did have a clue, or she thought she did, but it was no longer in Keiko's possession: the DSLR camera she'd brought along with her for work. The last photo found on the memory card, taken the day before she was found, was an upside-down shot of Room 501's front door. It was open, revealing what looked like a trash bag beyond, and it almost looked like perhaps there was a person's face on the other side of the guardrail, but it was too blurry and unfocused to make out anything in detail. When asked what it was, Keiko was at a loss to answer.

In the end, the string of incidents ended abruptly with Keiko, and by the time the whole thing settled down into a big question mark and Urban Heights Eifukucho was no longer subject to suspicion, Keiko had been transferred to front-desk work at the sales office.

“What was the deal with that, anyway?”

It felt a tad bizarre, being the “victim” of something so heavily reported on in

the press, but what she remembered experiencing didn't seem to match up with what the articles said. With all the other "loss-of-consciousness incidents," the subject would just be walking down the street when they suddenly felt a chill wind and instantly passed out, unable to remember anything else. Every single time. Keiko, meanwhile, didn't remember feeling ill at all, and she wasn't even in public. She was the only "victim" discovered indoors.

It was ultimately decided that every apartment on the fifth floor would be priced at half market value or below, categorized under the uniquely Japanese euphemism of "accident housing"—but even then, potential tenants wouldn't touch any of them. The building's reputation was already in the gutter overall, and besides, the only reason Keiko had been going in and out of Urban Heights Eifukucho at all was because of neighbors complaining about "weird lights" and "people going inside." Place a managing employee's unsolved accident inside the place on top of *that*, and customers would almost have to be crazy to venture inside.

It was just a tough sell. Being so empty at three years old—sort of new, sort of *not* new—would make anyone suspicious of the place's background. And if someone was, all they had to do was go on the Net and visit news sites that outlined, in comprehensive detail, everything from the construction fraud to the unsolved mysteries that came after. It meant that, for the fifth floor Keiko was found in, the company received no customer interest whatsoever, despite being so much cheaper than the real estate around it.

Until yesterday, that is.

"Oop. Almost time."

Yesterday, someone came along to the sales office and asked to apply for a rental in Urban Heights Eifukucho, asking for Keiko by name. The customer had called the office directly, instead of going through Ohmura Group or a rental site. A young woman, by the sound of it, and astoundingly, she even requested Room 501.

This had befuddled Keiko intensely. It wasn't that anyone had died horribly in there, no, but every advertisement for a fifth-floor apartment in the place included the phrase "CALL FOR DETAILS" on it. She didn't know if this woman

had seen that or not, but if that's what the company wrote, it was generally her job to explain what the "details" were. Doing that didn't exactly thrill her as an agent, but a job was a job.

But when she tried to explain the truth behind Room 501 to the woman over the phone, she'd been breezily cut off. "I'm aware of all that," she said, "and I would still like to rent that location, if possible." And if *that's* what she said, there was no reason to refuse her. In this business, it was often the case that once you rented out one slot, the rest filled up like an avalanche.

Keiko wasted no time working out the contracts as she waited for the client to visit the office. She was soon greeted by a younger woman with long hair, dressed in business attire and sporting a large shoulder bag. She was about Keiko's age, maybe a tad younger, and while she looked like just another new grad fresh from getting hired somewhere, her facial features seemed to be alive with an intense force, as if she had been through a great deal in her life. It made Keiko forget to address her for a moment—a poor way to deal with a customer. It was as though seeing this woman had just triggered something in her mind, somehow.

Have I seen this woman somewhere before...?

"Hello. My name is Yusa, and I had an appointment for right now?"

The voice finally made Keiko snap out of it.

"...Oh, my apologies. Thank you for coming! Please, feel free to sit down."

Ah, yes, that's right. The customer's last name was Yusa. The Japanese characters used to write it were different from Keiko's, but still pronounced the same. Maybe that was what had confused her, is all.

"Well, thank you very much for your interest in our rentals. My name is also Yusa...um, written like this. I'm the one who answered your phone call."

"Great. Good to meet you."

Yusa, the customer, gave her a light bow. *Of course*, Keiko thought. *She asked for me by name over the phone, didn't she?* There wasn't any need for Keiko to introduce herself all over again.

“So, you expressed an interest in Room 501 of Urban Heights Eifukucho. Have you visited the building itself yet?”

“Yes, a few times. It was open to the public as a model apartment for a time, too, so...”

She’d visited “a few times” and still wanted to move in? Keiko found herself surprised once again.

“Ah. Well, for this location, there is a thing or two that we are required to inform potential tenants about in advance. If you wish to change your mind afterward, keep in mind that I’d be happy to recommend a number of other places for you, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Right. I’m aware of that. But before that, I just wanted to be sure... If I say ‘yes’ to all of that, you’ll let me rent it, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, um, yes, certainly.”

Ms. Yusa seemed to have her heart set on the place. There were people out there who never batted an eye at problem rentals like this, to be sure, but Room 501 was meant for a single occupant. Ms. Yusa would be by herself, and a single woman asking for a room with *that* kind of history was, to say the least, brave of her.

“Well, unless the floor’s falling apart or there’s no front door or water or electricity or something, I’m pretty interested in renting it.”

Even after Keiko explained everything again, Ms. Yusa’s will couldn’t be bent. If she knew all of it and was still willing to move into this poster child for junk properties, the company couldn’t ask for anything more. Keiko had no reason to drag her feet if the client was this willing to take it on. It was time to tackle the contract.

“All right. First off, on this sheet, you see the box with the heavy line around it? I’ll need you to provide a daytime phone number and your workplace... Oh!”

The woman’s phone, along with her workplace, were familiar to Keiko. Between that and the client’s last name, she began to seriously wonder if this was just a coincidence at all.

“Mm? What is it?”

“Oh, um... I just noticed that you had the same phone model I have, Ms. Yusa. That...and if you don't mind me mentioning it, I actually worked part-time at your workplace in the past.”

“Oh, really?”

The woman gave her a little smile of surprise.

“Plus...”

“Hmm?”

“Your last name's pronounced exactly the same as mine, so, you know, I couldn't help but see a lot of me in you... I apologize. I don't mean to sound strange.”

“Oh, no. You've got a good point! Maybe we met somewhere before.”

Keiko could feel that smile of hers grate against something deep within her memory, but everything about this told her that this was their first meeting.

“...In that case, you said that you'd like to move in beginning tomorrow, so I'll need to guide you through the equipment available to you. We don't have a full-time apartment manager on the premises, so we'll head over to the building shortly so I can guide you around.”

Picking up the key to Room 501, Keiko took Ms. Yusa over to her company car and drove the several minutes it took to reach Urban Heights Eifukucho. Passing through the lobby's auto-locking door, they boarded the elevator, got off at the fifth floor, and walked down the quiet corridor.

“.....”

And there was that sense of déjà vu again. That feeling she knew this woman. The weirdest thing. Had she seen something here in the corridor, back then? The more she tried to recall it, the more the ill-fitting fragments drifted away from the fingers of her memory, like a dream she'd woken up from but couldn't remember any longer.

She turned the key and opened the door. The apartment was barren. Then Keiko remembered something else. This had served as a model apartment for,

essentially, a week or so. The workmen very quickly took the rental furniture out of there—no need to fully decorate a rental nobody was going to look at anyway.

“Ms. Yusa...”

“Yes?”

“When did you visit this apartment for the first time?”

“Hmm, when was it...?” She smiled lightly, unable to give an exact date. “Anyway, I think it’s very nice. I like it. I heard the rumors about ghosts and stuff, but by the looks of things, I’m sure that ghost wouldn’t feel worthy of the place any longer.”

“Yeah...”

Keiko could do nothing but ponder this, unsure how to take it. But as this unusual customer entered the living room, she stopped at the center of it, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

<“Something tells me...I’m never going to forget this place. The first room where I ever found solace in this world...”>

“Huh?”

The sudden flurry of indecipherable words from her lips made Keiko stare in astonishment.

“Anyway,” the customer continued in Japanese, “thanks so much for taking the time out to show me around. If it wasn’t for you, I don’t know if I’d ever find a way to live here. Thank you very much.”

Emi Yusa, this woman Keiko may or may not have seen before, left Keiko’s doubts in the dust as she turned toward her and deeply bowed.



“And, really, looking back at it, I couldn’t even tell you how much I owe Keiko for that.”

Emi was with her two friends, seated around a table with some cups of tea and a small pile of cream puffs.

“Hohhh. So did you take the name ‘Yusa’ from that woman, too?”

Emi gave an enigmatic nod to Rika’s question. “It was maybe half that, I guess? It had a ring kind of the same way as ‘Justina’ in my mind, too, but I think she had *some* influence.”

“But,” Emeralda began, her stomach stuffed full of Rika’s cream puffs and her mind fully contented, “if you put it that waaay, you could’ve gone with ‘Kimura’ too, nooo?”

“Ah, yeah, the lady from the Kimura Clock Shop? I wasn’t planning to stay here for long back then, so I was too suspicious to get very involved with her, but I’ve actually gone shopping at her place a few times since I moved here. We talked a little, too, but she’s just your typical old lady. Driven to sell, sell, sell, yeah, but otherwise normal. I never *did* ask her how much she got for that Erenium gold piece.”

She had gone to Kimura Clocks for both the alarm clock in her bedroom and the watch she wore to work, and Ms. Kimura had treated her with very good humor on both occasions, so she must’ve gotten enough that seventy thousand yen didn’t much matter to her.

“But Keiko didn’t just connect me to this apartment... She was also the start of how I discovered the Devil King in the first place.”

“Ohh? How do you meeean?”

“Yeah, ‘cause it sounds to me like you just pretended to be a ghost to force ‘em to give you a deal on rent. Where does Maou fit into it?”

Emi laughed at Rika’s appraisal—she was never one to mince words—then stood up and took a scrapbook out from the closet.

“Here’s a newspaper clipping from back then...and here’s a map of part of the city.”

Rika and Emeralda peered at the page she’d opened up. It made Rika nod as she recalled her own memories.

“Ohh, yeah, I think I remember this happening. I moved here not too long before then, and I was like ‘wow, *that’s* kinda scary.’”

“Yeah, when Keiko became a...all right, ‘victim’ of that fainting epidemic thanks to me, it got reported on the news a whole lot. This map shows the sites where the victims before her fainted, along with the order in which it happened. It started in Harajuku, then slowly but surely made its way over to Sasazuka here, you see?”

“Ohhh! Nowww I see!”

Emeralda picked up on what Emi tried to say first.

“So you learrned from Keiko’s Idea Liiink that there’s no holy force in this worrrld...and that you’ll looose it if you can’t controlll it.”

“Right.”

“Ummm?”

“In other words,” Emi explained to the slightly confused Rika, “I realized for the first time that the demons might be subject to the same conditions. There’s no demonic force in this world, either, so I thought, you know, they were wounded on their way here; maybe they lost so much force that they were too weak for me to detect. I didn’t think he devolved all the way down to a MgRonald part-timer, but...”

She laughed as she pointed at the site of the first incident.

“So the Devil King and Alciel came to Japan with essentially zero demonic power—but it didn’t just scatter to the four winds. Unfortunately, it was still here, in Japan.”

Satan and Alciel, both bruised and battered after fighting Emi, had the ability to intercept the power escaping their bodies and suck it back in. She had guessed that they first lost it after coming out of the Gate, but just as it was with Emi, the Gate’s exit had been in the middle of the sky. If they indeed lost their power the moment they came through, where had all that force gone? The answer: Into the atmosphere around the Gate. This force causes intensive changes to the human body when exposed to it, and that explained those mysterious bouts of unconsciousness—rogue bits of Satan and Alciel’s demonic force, being blown into people on the street.

“Huh? So, wait... So you’re saying that their demonic force was drifting

around at random in the atmosphere, like PM 2.5 particles or cedar pollen, and that's why everyone didn't get stricken at once?"

"Well, that's not all, either. They were both on the move, so I think they were probably marking entire neighborhoods behind them with that stuff until they finally settled down in that apartment."

Emeralda laughed. "Thaaat's kind of a nasty way to put it."

"And I think nobody fell *seriously* ill from it because the demons really *were* that weakened. But anyway, once those incidents stopped taking place, I figured they had to be somewhere in the area, so whenever I had the time I cased all the neighborhoods around there accessible via private rail from Shinjuku and Shibuya. Of course, it was just me and I was busy with work, so it took a ton of time."

"I apolllogize that I couldn't be there to help when you needed it the most."

"Oh, not at all. There was a good reason for it, and I believed the whole time you'd come for me, Eme."

"Awww, Emiliaaaa!"

Emeralda hugged Emi, overcome with emotion.

"Whoa, Emeralda, you're gonna wake up Alas Ramus if you holler like that."

Emeralda put a hand to her mouth at Rika's scolding finger in the air.

"That," Emi added, "and the maps I took the time to read carefully when I was looking through Keiko's stuff gave me a few hints."

"The white map and the blue map? The blue one shows the names of homeowners and ads for nearby shops and stuff, right? What was the white one with all the numbers on it?"

"Well, I probably won't see it again, but it was a map of roadside land prices."

""Roadside land prices?"" Rika and Emeralda asked in unison, unfamiliar with the term.

A map like this shows the price of land (per square meter) used by homes along the roads that made up a city area. These values are used to calculate

things like inheritance and real estate taxes, but also serve as real estate price indices themselves, since they reflect the most direct value of the land as evaluated by public authorities.

“Out of the last three incidents that took place—except for Keiko’s—one was near a hospital, one was along the Koshu-Kaido road, and one was in a residential area near the Odakyu rail line. If you connect the dots, they’re all in locations with low appraised real estate values, nowhere near a major road—in other words, places with plenty of cheap, high-density housing. I couldn’t imagine that the Devil King with no demonic force had anything he could easily sell for money, unlike me, so I thought he might’ve been hiding out somewhere in this area.”

In reality, of course, Maou *had* retained a little of his magic, and he was using his own ways to obtain money. Villa Rosa Sasazuka, the place he and Alciel wound up at, was located a distance outside the triangle the three dots formed, but the McDonald Maou worked at—and where Emi had just applied to—was neatly framed by the shape.

“Huh. So I guess he wasn’t just wandering around Sasazuka at random. But it took you a while to actually find Maou?”

“Well, it would’ve had to. It might seem like I narrowed it down a lot, but I didn’t have any impartial evidence to work with, and as small as it looks on the map, if you actually walk it, it’s still huge. And I couldn’t work on the search every day, either. Sometimes I’d get nervous and take the train out somewhere farther, or I’d hit the archives to see if there were similar incidents elsewhere in Japan. So I wound up pursuing a lot of false leads, but...well.”

Emi’s eyes regarded a point far away as she reminisced.

“Back then, you know, I didn’t think any of *this* was gonna happen.”

“This,” of course, referred to all the extraordinary events that transpired after she encountered Maou again. She couldn’t kill him—Maou, the Devil King. In fact, they started seeing each other daily, sharing the same dinner table, having a daughter...and she started trusting in him. Allowing him to help her, even.

“I never thought it’d turn out like this... I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought that in Japan, over and over again.”

“And do you regret any of thaaat?”

“Not really,” Emi swiftly replied.

She never thought she’d say *that*, either.



It was nearly a year after Emilia had arrived in Japan, right about at the point where she had walked down every street within that triangle she had narrowed him down to. That string of sudden faintings had long quieted down, forgotten. Unlike her first few days in Japan, she now had a whole life for herself here, one she was used to, and she was blessed with good friends and a decent workplace—but still, Emi’s loneliness had deepened once more.

As always, she could find no sign of Satan, the Devil King, or of his Great Demon General Alciel, and no help from Ente Isla seemed to be forthcoming. Instead, nothing but time passed, one day after the next. Acting Japanese, and growing content with life in Japan, meant she never felt in a position where she had to reveal her origins, like she had with Keiko Yusa once. If anything, doing so posed a high risk of making her the target of fear, as Keiko herself showed.

But she still had someone close to her. Someone who picked on all her anxieties.

“...Hey, Emi, you been feeling all right lately? You eating okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just kinda tired and losing my appetite...”

“Well, I guess you must be dealing with something big, but you aren’t gonna accomplish anything if you fall limp on the street. You better eat.”

“...Yeah. You’re right. Thanks...Rika.”

“Right? So get some stamina back, first off! You need some good food if you want the energy to worry about stuff!”

Without realizing it, Rika was helping banish Emilia’s loneliness. She never dug too deep into other people’s private lives, but it was like she knew all the tools for lightening Emilia’s heart from the moment they’d met.

Over time, Emilia began to train other people on the job, offering guidance on all the things she herself learned in Japan. It reminded her of Keiko. That agent

had contacted her just once after she moved into Urban Heights Eifukucho, via postcard. It said that she was marrying and returning to Aomori, so Emilia would be working with a new agent from now on. And, yes, maybe Emilia had blocked Keiko's memories, but having someone she'd revealed her heart so fully to leave and go far away was—as presumptuous as she knew it was—a shock.

She had agonized over telling the truth to Rika several times. But as her only friend in Japan, Rika had stepped up to ease her day-to-day loneliness and Emilia didn't want to lose her, so she kept on lying instead. Someday, she imagined, the day would come when she didn't have to lie any longer. She could find someone she could be with, without having to hide her origins and her true self. She wanted that so much—someone she didn't have to hide things from, someone who knew about her past, someone who could bury all the solitude.

Those were the thoughts on her mind as she walked down a Sasazuka street she had passed through many times, only to run into some rain the weather forecast failed to mention.

“Oh, where did *this* come from?” she whined as she glared upward and jogged under a nearby restaurant's canopy to wait out the rain...

“Um, if you like...”

“Huh?”

...only to be presented with a dirty, beaten-down plastic umbrella.

THE AUTHOR, THE AFTERWORD, AND YOU!

This afterword includes some mild spoilers. If you're the type to read the back of the book first, take caution.

In the afterword to *The Devil Is a Part-Timer!*, Vol. 13, I boldly declared that my magazine-published stories would "make it to print in novel form sooner or later." Well, "sooner" came sooner than I thought! Volume 14 wound up being the first short-story collection since Volume 7.

It's not that there's some rule stating I have to put out one of these every seven volumes (and technically the *Devil Is a Part-Timer!*, Vol. 0 prequel came out in Japan first, so it's actually been eight volumes), but anyway, if you read the stories in the book, it should help you understand the world of *Devil* on a deeper level than before. I'd like to pretend to believe so, at least, but I'd be lying. Half of what I cover seems to have to do with kitchen appliances, for example.

Let's take a look back at each story, and the way that it weaves a picture of each character's life.

The Hero and High Schooler Become Friends

This one begins several days after the end of Volume 1. It shows, I suppose, that this "typical girl you'd find anywhere" was really strong-minded even before anything happened to her. They were all so *innocent* back then, weren't they? This was also around the first time Emeralda demonstrated her proclivity for gluttony, despite her tiny frame.

You know, though, is it me, or do conveyor-belt sushi places not have much along the belt any longer? Instead, everyone's just tapping at their order panels to snag what they want first. Ah, well.

The Devil Looks Back on the Frugal Life

This guy probably ranks number one or two in the "characters who lead the

most stressful lives” leaderboard, and I wanted to reward him a little.

As mentioned in the story, feeding honey to a baby under twelve months of age, before their intestinal system fully develops, may lead to a case of juvenile botulism. This bacteria isn’t something that dies when you boil it, so make sure you don’t give an infant that young any processed foods with honey in it, either.

The Devil Snags a New Phone With the Hero’s Money

Like I said in the afterword to *Devil*, Vol. 5, the reality depicted in the story is set around what you and I would consider the year 2010. That’s partly because that was when I wrote the prototype that eventually became *Devil*, but now I’m starting to see the real-life stores, companies, services, and systems I’m modeling the ones in *Devil* after cease to exist as I write this, in 2015. In an era where smartphones are all over the place, the term “cell phone” might start to fall off the face of the earth before too long.

The Hero Is Amazed by the Enemy General’s Vast Powers

You really *do* see these holes show up. It’d be funny if it didn’t feel like such a disgrace. Distressed jeans are in these days, but if you see holes anywhere besides the knees and cuffs, then that kind of goes beyond “distressed,” I suppose. Personally, when I start to get holes in the front pockets, that’s usually my cue to buy a new pair.

The Devil Learns About His Boss’s Past

Finally, a mystery from Volume 2 gets wrapped up! The story of a fierce rivalry from days untold! No, seriously!

Yuki Mizushima, manager of the Fushima-en location, is an imported character from the anime version, just like Takefumi Kawata, Akiko Ohki, and Kotaro Nakayama. I enjoy her as a character, but she mostly showed up in anime-original situations, like when all the women showed off their swimsuits or got involved in serious horror situations—real high-impact set pieces like that. Those scenes never really put the spotlight on her, so I tossed her in here since I thought that’d be my best bet for giving her something to work with.

It always hits you right there, doesn’t it, when someone all proper in their work outfit drops the façade and cuts loose in their own clothing?

A Few Days Ago: The Hero Is (About to Be) a Part-Timer!

This is a smaller prequel covering the days right after Emilia Justina came to Japan, dovetailing nicely with *Devil*, Vol. 1. It's also the only tale in this book that hasn't been published anywhere else before.

I know you guys have been waiting a long while for this. Yes, *this* is why Emi's fancy apartment is so cheap. Being the Hero, and being alone, meant she had to face obstacles that not even Maou and Ashiya got to experience.

Simply living life can be a grind in a lot of ways, but as they say, you can't take it with you. This volume offers a peek at how these characters honestly are—a little laid-back, as they struggle to survive each day. Hopefully it's served as a kind of refresher that softened the hearts of everyone who picked it up.

See all of you in the next volume!

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